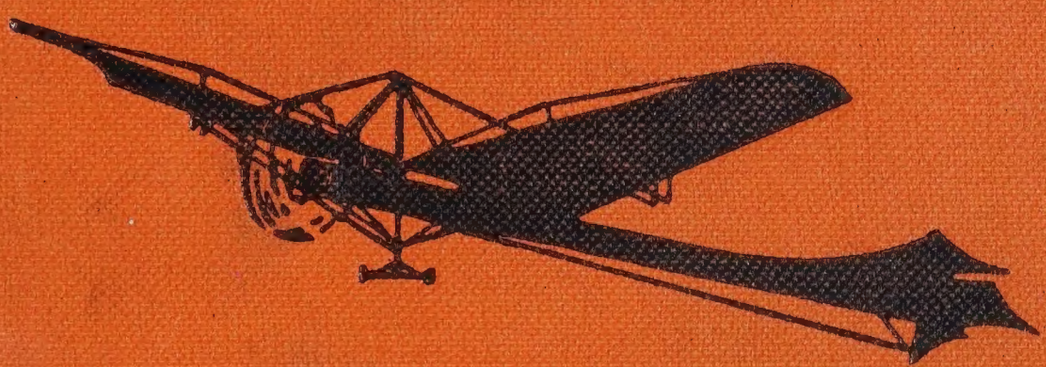
The SOVEREIGN POWER



MARK·LEE·LUTHER

For Ben —

With the Author's love

June 1911

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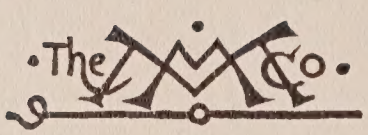

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THE SOVEREIGN POWER

BY

MARK LEE LUTHER

AUTHOR OF "THE CRUCIBLE," "THE HENCHMAN,"
"THE MASTERY," ETC.

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS
BY CHASE EMERSON

New York
THE MACMILLAN COMPANY
1911

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Set up and electrotyped. Published May, 1911.

Norwood Press
J. S. Cushing Co. — Berwick & Smith Co.
Norwood, Mass., U.S.A.

To

MARIE AND JOHN ADAMS THAYER

IN REMEMBRANCE OF THE

GRANDE SEMAINE D'AVIATION

RHEIMS 1909

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

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THE SOVEREIGN POWER

CHAPTER I

The affair began before a tapestry in the right aisle of Rheims Cathedral. Not that the tapestry matters. Antiquarians have pored over its quaint reflection of bygone manners, artists worshiped its color; but its significance here lies merely in its momentary appeal to Ann Milburn. She knew more or less about tapestries. She knew about them as she knew about pictures and sculpture, jewels and laces, yachts, opera boxes, motorcars, and like toys of the opulent. She had tasted most of life's luxuries, and found their flavor insipid. It was a tame world.

But she approved of the tapestry. The sunlight of the August morning, slanting down through stained glass, warmed the mellow tones of the old fabric to a loveliness rare enough to arrest any mortal to whom color speaks. It was not insipid, this sensation, and Ann lingered to savor it, and, because she lingered, she presently encountered, one immediately after the other, two men who were to bulk large in a future she was to find as piquant as the most jaded taste could crave.

She saw the first of these men standing in the transept before the choir screen. His age might

have been anywhere between twenty-eight and thirty-five. Brown haired, brown eyed, pale with the pallor of one who dwells much in cities, tall, finely erect, he carried himself like one more accustomed to command than to obey. There was something historically reminiscent in his profile, and, had she been still in her teens, Ann would have called him an ideal hero of romance. Being instead a traveled young person of two and twenty, she decided to label him Pole or Russian, as modern as his clothes, who probably found the boulevards of Paris more agreeable than his own dreary plains. Whereupon, even as she dismissed him, he did a thing that upset her neat classification.

He was intent upon the newest of the saints across the choir; the figure in shining armor, bright against its canopy of crimson velvet, which witnesses that Jeanne d'Arc has at last come into her own in the fane where she crowned her puppet King. But it was not his absorption that struck her; she had seen others kneel and weep. It was the singular fact that this modern of moderns, this boulevardier, deliberately raised his hand and paid the heroic Maid the tribute of a military salute. Then, turning, he met Ann's gaze, flushed, and, after an instant's hesitation, came gravely toward her.

"She inspires one, the little Jeanne," he said in English. "She fought against such odds!" And he went on.

Who was he?

Watching him disappear behind the last gray column of the aisle, she became abruptly aware that she herself was an object of close scrutiny.

If some one had called her by name, she could have been no more certain or felt a stronger impulse to face round. The gaze of the unknown drew her with a force of will that nearly overmatched her own. But because this was Europe and because she was Ann Milburn, she looked without seeming to look. Apparently it was the great glowing rose window that preoccupied her as she came slowly into the nave. In point of fact, she inventoried her observer as minutely as if she stared him in the face.

He was beyond doubt a compatriot. Whatever his ancestry, the New World had set its mark upon him. Close shaven, his jaw lean yet square, his mouth firm but humorous, his nonchalant carriage the mask of a muscular frame and a probably acute self-respect, he was as surely American as if she had met him bolting into Wall Street or astride a mustang on a Texas ranch. She had met him somewhere! That was as certain as his nationality. Moreover, he knew it. His whole attitude bespoke expectancy. He plainly hoped that when her eyes should deign to drop from the splendid wheel, they would perceive and recognize him; but she did not drop her eyes. Puzzle as she might, she could not evoke his name or setting, and so, with her gaze still uplifted to the rose window, she passed him by.

Her hotel stood so near that the sculptures of the famous façade had woven themselves into the pattern of her waking dreams. She could almost have tossed a croissant from her breakfast tray over into the mouth of a gargoyle. The Middle Ages seemed within touch. But now, the cathedral at her back, she faced her own century. There was noth-

ing medieval about the Lion d'Or. Automobiles backed and turned and honked before its doorway; its courtyard, dining rooms, lobby, and corridors were thronged with men and women as up to date as the motors, and, like the motors, deriving from all nations where progress is a fetish and world-politics a fad. They were come to see a new thing under the sun; the first congress of flying machines in human history.

Her uncle awaited her, watch in hand. Time had been a valuable asset in Justin Blair's career. He could not waste it, even in his pleasures. "Five minutes late!" he greeted her.

"But they fly all day, don't they?" she asked.

He handed her into the big touring car without answering, and they glided out through the archway into the square.

"It's the luncheon table, my dear," explained her aunt. "They say we must be on the spot early. They hold tables for nobody."

Luncheon did not seem of paramount importance to Ann. For one valid reason, she was not hungry. For another, she was preoccupied. Her thoughts were still busy with the dissimilar pair she had encountered in the cathedral. Who was the man of the world who had paid sentimental homage to the Maid of Orléans? And who was the vaguely familiar American whose name she could not recall?

Her uncle solved the latter riddle. As they swung through the Place Royale and headed toward Bethény, he twisted half round in his seat beside the chauffeur and addressed her. "It was the son of my old regimental commander who told me to

look sharp for a table," he said. "I ran across him last night just after we arrived. You remember young Page, don't you, who beaued you round Old Point five years ago?"

"I remember," she nodded.

Yet she had not remembered in the cathedral. Inconceivable as it would have been to the Ann Milburn of five years ago, the sight of Oliver Page had conjured up no vision of the Chesapeake on a May morning. Was it his altered dress? He had looked exceedingly well in uniform. But with amused eyes she told herself that it was not the uniform that lacked. It was her other self. She was a different Ann Milburn from the romantic girl, fresh from a school of cloistral austerity, who thought the young army engineer fit company for the Knights of the Round Table. She mused over that remote other self with the smiling indulgence of a grandmother.

Her uncle's senatorial term was just ending when she had come to Washington to be launched in the real world. Why a senatorship should ever have seemed to him worth while, Justin Blair could not now comprehend; but it had once so seemed, and the Middle Western State that had enriched him and his without tedious persuasion gratified his wish. He had done his duty by the post, as, legend to the contrary, rich senators sometimes do, bringing to his committee assignments the energy, if not the zest, he had devoted to the board meetings of his various corporations. Using his own eyes had made him what he was, and the Old Point Comfort episode was characteristic. Conflicting statements regarding

harbor improvements had wasted the time of one of his committees, and he had employed a week-end adjournment to see for himself. An officer of high rank had piloted him among the docks and dredgers he had come to study. Ann, avid of any holiday whatsoever, had fallen to Oliver Page. What a chivalrous figure he had seemed to her inexperience! For that matter, what a hero! His quick resource had undoubtedly averted a collision between their launch and a barge, a collision of which she would have been the first victim. He had probably saved her life. And to-day she had forgotten his very name!

"He has thrown up the service," added her uncle over his shoulder. "I don't blame them, those engineers, if something better turns up."

"What has turned up?" asked his wife.

"He didn't say."

They were in the thick of the traffic now, a trivial unit in the flood which, its tributaries as many as the streets of Rheims, poured its full strength along the Bethény road. In motors, taxicabs, char-à-bancs, chaises, drays, in perambulators and in arms, on horseback and afoot, France and her guests made pilgrimage to witness the latter-day miracle. Had they all drunk deep of the wine of the country, — which cafés, booths, signboards, and insistent men with handbills let no one ignore, — these trooping thousands could have pressed over the dusty highway with no greater eagerness. Even Justin Blair forgot to be matter-of-fact. He shifted his cigar from mouth to hand and from hand to mouth like a schoolboy. His wife perched on the extreme edge

of her seat, her eyes brilliant, a pink spot in each cheek, her hat, disregarded, tilting rakishly above her white hair.

Only Ann was calm. To her human flight presented itself as merely one more diversion likely to pall like other things of which one unwisely hoped too much. The gay effervescence of the crowd seemed childish, the roadside spectacle a glorified circus day, Aviation Week an advertisement for champagne. The tribunes and other structures of the aërodrome, now visible across the fields, completed her disenchantment. A thousand common race courses could boast better. What a tawdry goal for this lavish outpouring of enthusiasm! And not a flying machine in sight!

They quitted their car and passed through the wicket. Halfway to the tribunes Blair was effusively hailed by a plump young man with a florid face and a political handshake.

"Don't tell me this is your first day!" he cried.

Justin admitted the shameful truth and presented him, "Mr. Buckley, of the American Embassy in Paris."

The plump young man continued to voice his surprise at their delay. How could they wait till the final day of the Grande Semaine before coming down? Didn't they realize what this thing meant? Hadn't they read the papers?

"We were visiting friends in Normandy," apologized Mrs. Blair.

Buckley deemed the excuse insufficient, and told her so at length.

Justin, falling behind, drooped an ironic eyelid at

his niece. "Price Buckley frequently assays better than he prospects," he vouchsafed. "Never meet him before?"

"No," said Ann.

"He's a secretary of legation. I used to know him in Washington. He has more influential uncles than anybody I ever met."

Acting on his knowledge of the budding diplomat's latent usefulness, he asked him to luncheon, and, to use Justin Blair's own phraseology, the investment paid. Buckley smoothed the way like a professional courier. He secured them a table in the most favored row; he knew the precise dishes that this Paris restaurant, transported to the harvest fields, served best, and ordered them; he spoke as authoritatively of the cellars of Rheims as if he owned them, and recommended a label of a perfection which he said moved connoisseurs to tears. Amid these activities he still found time to devote himself to Ann Milburn with a zeal that lost nothing from his consciousness that she was not only Justin Blair's niece, but a girl of exceptional beauty, reputed to have a swollen fortune in her own right.

The company roundabout he assured her was brilliant. Yonder was the brainiest man in the English Cabinet. His host was the British Ambassador — charming man! That youth there was the Brazilian pretender, Dom Pedro's grandson. Did pretenders interest her? Then notice the woman at the fourth table in the second tier. She was a Bourbon. Her husband had a claim on the French throne. Charming woman! He had never talked with a woman who had more esprit. But, speaking of conversa-

tionalists, she should meet the genius of the Comédie Française, that obvious personage two tables beyond the Princess. There was a historic group for you! His companions were the French Minister for Foreign Affairs and the Nestor of French journalism, a man who had fought over the barricades in the Commune, been exiled, won a hundred duels, done everything. Splendid fellow when you knew him — life of any party!

A smile crept into Ann's eyes in spite of her, and Price Buckley, who looked at her eyes when he was not hunting celebrities, surprised it.

"But you've lived in Paris," he broke off. "You know these things."

She welcomed the interruption of a little flurry of handclapping and bravos near the stairway.

"Blèriot!" announced her cicerone. "Don't you recognize his profile? He still limps from his last spill, you see. Let me show you the other flying men, the real celebrities of Rheims. They all get round here at this time of day. That's Santos-Dumont down there lunching with that group of Americans. He's not competing this week. His motor does not suit him, he tells me. And there, over on the left, are Farman and young Paulhan together — and a dare-devil pair they are! And there is Curtiss — modest Curtiss — who is so shy he had to be dragged to meet the President of France. You must meet Curtiss. And there are Comte de Lambert and Lefevre, who use the Wright machine — yes, and Delagrange, who gave up sculpture for aviation. That lad facing us — third table — is young Bunau-Varilla, a mere schoolboy, whose

father gave him an aëroplane as a reward of merit two or three weeks ago. Hello! What's up?" He half rose in his place and craned toward an upper tier. "I might have guessed," he laughed. "It's Latham going out. See him there — the chap with the bruised cheek? His second fall in the Channel did that. Charming fellow to know, Latham. Hear them applaud! He's the idol of Rheims."

Ann left the table with relief. He bored her, the budding diplomat, with his knowing chatter of celebrities, his silly enthusiasm. The whole hectic atmosphere of the place bored her. It was nonsense to make heroes of these men — manufacturers, artisans, sportsmen — who went in for aëroplanes as they had gone in for automobiles. After all, it was a mere matter of mechanics, of dull figures, this novelty of which excitable people made so much.

But she was not rid of Price Buckley yet. He went with them to the box, which by a stroke of luck Justin had secured for the final day, to point out more celebrities, — "charming people to know," — to explain the conditions of the contests, the comparative merits of aviators and their machines, the topography of the course. He left nothing unexplained in that sunny plain where in the noontime interval the cavalry maneuvered. The far horizon, shimmering in August haze, was stripped of its last mystery. Rheims lay there; the Neufchâtel highway there. Yonder was the timekeeper's box; those low structures were the hangars that housed the marvels; that standard with its queer pendants was merely the signal mast; those white pylons

marked the course. All was mapped out, classified, made inexorably clear. She was bored to exhaustion — and not an aëroplane had flown. Indeed, whether they flew or not had become a matter of supreme indifference. Her one positive desire in life was to annihilate Price Buckley.

Then the drone of a powerful motor drew their attention toward the hangars and upon a white shape, with outspread wings, which a group of workmen seemed hard put to it to control. Buckley clapped his field glasses to his eyes.

"You're in luck, Miss Milburn," he said. "You are to make your début with Latham himself!"

Would the Buckley creature never have done? Ann languidly waited for something to happen. Then something did happen. To her inexperienced eye the winged shape spurned the ground at once. At all events, it was clear of the earth when she fairly realized that it was in motion and, slanting steadily upward, was bearing toward the tribunes. Then, high above, it drove past like a great gull, described a wide spiral over the judges' stand, and, returning, higher still, again swept by and down the course.

"Latham! Latham! *À vous* Latham!" called the crowd, and Price Buckley, as if the spectacle was of his own devising, beamed round at Ann in triumph.

"Isn't it all I said?" he demanded. "Isn't it superb?"

But Ann had neither eyes nor ears for the Buckleys. Caught out of herself, she reverted in an instant to childhood. Her lips parted, her cheeks

aflush, her fan crushed in her tense grasp, she strained her gaze after the winged marvel as it rounded a far pylon, and with the sun glancing on its snowy planes, took its serene way over the hot plain into the midsummer haze.

CHAPTER II

RAPT, self-forgetful, she drew the eyes of the box holders, to whom Aviation Week was also a social function, and of the promenading thousands below, for whom the boxes were a counter attraction to the aëroplanes. In greater or less degree they had felt the emotion she so frankly betrayed. They not only relived their own experience in watching her; they saw it mirrored in a face of uncommon loveliness.

Ann was one of Nature's happy mediums. Not faultless in modeling, as sculptors measure perfection, her features escaped coldness. Neither blond nor brunette, she had the enduring delicacy of coloring that lies midway between extremes. If a single word would serve to describe the waving masses of her hair, it would be "chestnut"; but to choose the word is to remember that it gave off copper glints when the sun shone full upon it, and that under artificial light it sometimes showed black. Her eyes were no bad match for the oft-quoted cornflower; her mouth, shapely in repose, in her animated moments gave the laughing keynote to her face and, not content with its own charm, unveiled still another glory and Ann's secret vanity, an altogether superlative set of teeth. She stood in exotic contrast to her Latin neighbors, a lovely incarnation of

the youthful Feminine which stirred a profound sex sympathy in women and drew incoherent praise from men. If Latham was the sensation of the aërodrome, she won first honors in the tribunes.

This her aunt suddenly perceived. "Do sit down, dear," she enjoined with judicious strategy. "You're evidently in people's way, though they're too polite to do anything but stare."

Her eyes on the horizon, Ann obeyed. There was a chatter of many languages about her; the tireless Buckley made cocksure explanations to her uncle and aunt about all things under the sun; but for her there was only one point of interest, one dominating thought. That audacious marvel was the work of human hands; its directing intelligence was a man! A man soared there on high, rivaling the birds — a man!

Nor was the spell momentary. As machine after machine, monoplanes and biplanes, took flight, the spectacle gripped her with growing fascination. It possessed her like a beautiful vision, kindling her fancy, inspiring dreams. Was anything impossible to these men who mastered the air? Who could set bounds to their dominion? To what fastness might they not penetrate? No land could remain forbidden, no peak unscaled, no polar mystery insoluble. They foreshadowed another race.

Presently the longing to try this tremendous experience herself gripped her. The desire mastered her. It was an infatuation, a divine madness. She felt that she could barter ten years of her life for a single flight. Abruptly she turned on young Buckley.

"You know these men, the aviators?" she asked eagerly.

"Most of them."

"Have they ever asked you to ride?"

"No," he admitted, with reluctance. "You see, they're not precisely friends of mine."

"But they can carry passengers, of course?"

"Oh, yes. You'll see them do that yet. There is a passenger prize, you know. Farman often takes another man with him, sometimes two."

She fluttered the leaves of her program an instant. "But he uses a biplane," she said. "Can't the other sort, the ones that really look like birds, carry more than one?"

"Indeed they can. Blèriot has carried two, and so has Latham. Why, Latham took Fournier and Santos-Dumont for a spin when he was still a greenhorn."

Ann nodded her satisfaction. "I prefer the monoplane," she said.

Justin Blair chuckled. "You talk as if you intended to fly," he commented.

"I do."

"My dear!" exclaimed her aunt. "What has come over you?"

A tempest of applause forestalled an answer. Round the nearest pylon swept three aëroplanes at once; Farman and Sommer flying low, Latham, as always, soaring aloft. Ann held her breath as they passed, watched them to the turn, and then, as if she had taken a decision, again faced Price Buckley.

"Would they do something for you, these men?" she queried.

The diplomat became guarded. "Do something?" he repeated. "I don't know, Miss Milburn. As I told you, they are merely acquaintances. If you mean you would like to meet one or two of them and ask questions —"

"I want to be taken up," she interrupted. "I want to fly."

"My dear!" protested her aunt again. "How preposterous!"

"Why is it preposterous, Aunt Helen? I golf, swim, motor, toboggan, skee — why in the world shouldn't I fly if I can get the chance? Everybody will fly in a few years. I want to be among the first."

"But you're a woman," said Justin.

"What of it? Wouldn't you be proud to be the uncle of the only woman who flew at Rheims?"

Buckley recovered his form. "You are not the only woman who has wanted to fly at Rheims," he said, and told them of the popular actress who all the week had importuned the flying men to take her up. "But they wouldn't," he ended, "and if she failed —" He spread his hands in eloquent inference.

Miss Milburn put him icily in his place. "Whether she failed or not is nothing to me," she retorted. "I am not looking for an advertisement."

"But I didn't for a minute suggest —"

"Moreover, I don't want you to carry away the idea that I was begging you to intercede for me, Mr. Buckley. You conveyed the impression that you knew these men intimately —"

"My dear Miss Milburn —"

"Intimately, and I had thought that perhaps a private flight — after dusk, say — might be ar-

ranged. But since you don't really know them at all, it would naturally be an impertinence on your part to ask it. I hope I've made myself clear?"

The unhappy diplomat turned in desperation to the elder woman. "What have I done, Mrs. Blair?" he appealed.

Justin burst out laughing. "Upon my word, Buckley," he said, "you are a mere infant in their hands. You a diplomat and not know that a woman can box your ears and then prove that you're a brute! I'm ashamed of your ignorance."

Buckley smiled wanly and hastened to make his peace. "I'll tell you what I can do, Miss Milburn," he stated, brightening. "I can take you where you'll see what the aëroplanes are really like. The general public isn't admitted to the hangars," he was quite himself now; "but I can arrange matters. This will admit me." He touched a brassard on his left arm. "And I have another in my pocket for you, sir. The ladies I can manage through one of the officials. Shall we go now? There will be several machines about."

They descended to the promenade, passed the animated tiers of boxes and the press inclosure, and, leaving the unprivileged many behind, trooped after a once more buoyant Buckley into the place of mystery. Yet it was not mysterious at close range. The shelters were prosaic enough, mere rude makeshifts of pine and tin and canvas, and the aëroplanes themselves, seen thus close, looked hardly capable of the miracles they performed. What flimsy affairs they were at best! What supreme daring they demanded of the men who rode them!

Eager to vindicate himself, their guide hailed one of the aviators who stood beside his machine, and with a flourish introduced them. He was an undersized man of undistinguished aspect, who was abashed by his publicity; but he seemed a demigod to Ann, and she could find nothing to say to him. But their joint embarrassment was not shared by Buckley. He explained the aëroplane as if he had constructed it, showed the working of its various levers and rudders, and all but described his sensations in flight. He was checked only by a look of humorous understanding that passed between Justin Blair and the mere inventor of the machine.

"But I am only a theorist," he broke off. "This is the man who does things."

"And who is probably keen to be about them," added Justin considerately, and they moved on.

Buckley chose another topic. "There is the joke of Aviation Week," he said, with a condescending wave of the hand as they came round into the rear street of sheds, "an aëroplane that has never left its hangar. You can see it there where the canvas is looped back — that khaki-colored thing. At least, that's part of it. The chap who owns it has it strewn all over the place in such a jumble that nobody knows what it is really like. It has been in a mess ever since he struck Rheims."

"Has the machine ever flown anywhere?" Justin asked.

"Nobody seems to know. It's a mystery. The fellow himself is a mystery. They say he built the thing himself, motor and all, and stinted himself to do it. He sleeps there in the shed and eats where he

can. He probably counted on making a showing here that would pull him out of the hole."

"Poor fellow!" said Mrs. Blair. "How downcast he must be! Is he French?"

"That's another thing nobody knows. He is entered under a French name." Buckley consulted his program. "But one of the newspaper men tells me that he speaks English and looks American. That's all he knew. The chap wouldn't talk. Here's the entry — Olivier Beauregard."

Ann's eyes widened. "Beauregard?"

"Yes. See for yourself: 'Olivier Beauregard, monoplan; moteur, 60 chevaux.'"

She turned and stared wonderingly toward the shed of the luckless aviator. As she looked a man came to the entrance with an oily steel cylinder in his hands and held it critically to the light.

Buckley touched her sleeve. "There is the mystery now," he said, "that chap in overalls who has got himself messed up as black as a tinker. That's Beauregard."

Justin Blair gave an ejaculation of astonishment. "Beauregard!" he exclaimed. "It's Fighting Joe Page's boy — young Oliver. I told you, Ann, that I saw him last night."

But Ann was already halfway to the shed. It is rudimentary politeness to recognize a man who once saved your life. If she had forgotten him in the cathedral, she would make handsome amends now.

"My uncle told me he ran across you last night," she said, her smile its captivating best; "but we didn't dream you were one of the aviators." With full knowledge of what she was about she extended

an immaculately gloved hand which Page, confused by her sudden apparition, caught unthinkingly in his oil-stained grasp. Then, as their hands separated, he perceived the enormity he had committed and reddened to the hair.

"I didn't realize what I was doing," he stammered. "It was a ghastly mistake. I'm sorry, unspeakably sorry!"

Ann's smile never faltered. "If I didn't bother about the glove, why should you?" she asked, and, stripping it inside out before the others could approach, she rolled it in a little ball. "That tells no tales," she laughed, "and I'm twice as comfortable."

She was decidedly pleased with herself and her little maneuver. She had atoned magnificently for her stupidity in the cathedral. Whatever her faults, — and, as will be seen, they were many, — snobbery was not among them. It gave her an odd sense of long-standing intimacy with Page to have done this thing, and, as he talked with the others, she told herself that her school-girl enthusiasm had not been so callow after all. He had been very likable in his confusion; he was very manly in his difficult rôle of an aviator who had brought an aëroplane to Rheims that would not go. It was hard to believe him the architect of his own misfortunes. He had more the bearing of a man who had been worsted by chance.

"Your outfit looks as businesslike as the others," said Justin, peering into the shed. "What ails it, Page?"

The American shrugged. "I wish I knew," he an-

"It was a ghastly mistake," he stammered

swered. "We've got a lot to learn about aëroplanes. One day they balk; but we don't know why they balk. Another day they go; but we don't know why they go. It's just as it was with automobiles. At first they ran or lay down in the road, at their sweet will. But that was only in the beginning. Now they have no secrets."

Buckley unmasked a battery of questions. Didn't he know what part of his machine was out of order? Had he really, as people said, made it all himself? Couldn't he trust workmen to do it for him? Was there anything secret about its construction? Was that why he took the name of Beauregard and not his own?

Justin Blair saw annoyance in Page's tightened lips. "Look out!" he warned dryly. "My friend here is in diplomacy. Whatever you tell him goes into the archives."

The inventor with a gesture gave them the freedom of his shed. "It's the motor that's out of order," he replied. "I did make the aëroplane myself; but not because I wouldn't trust others to do it. I could not afford help. As for Beauregard, it's my second name—my mother was French—and I used it because I hoped to win the recognition in France that I haven't found at home. I am not the only man here who is entered under a nom de guerre. As for secrets," he faced his plump inquisitor, "you are very welcome to look the machine over."

"And make what you can of it!" added Ann to herself as she glanced in at the bewildering chaos. One detail alone struck her; a rough camp bed. It

was true, then, that story of his living here! He had probably staked everything he possessed on this venture — staked everything and lost!

Only an expert could have made head or tail of the dismembered aëroplane; but Buckley walked knowingly amid the puzzle and by his manner published his conviction that the situation was quite hopeless. Justin also looked over the shed; but he observed Page more closely than his belongings. When the others presently took their leave, he said briefly that he would rejoin them in the box.

"And now," he said, as Price Buckley's rotund outline went in eclipse, "let's get down to facts. I know Fighting Joe Page's son would never chuck the army for a wildcat scheme. Just what have you got here that the others haven't? And will money grease the wheels?"

CHAPTER III

A VAST dirigible had come out of Rheims and was swimming in great measured circles, five hundred feet aloft; in the lower air five aëroplanes swung steadily round the course in competition for the Prix du Tour de Piste; but Buckley's gaze ranged the spectators, not the sky, as he squired Ann and her aunt back to the tribunes, and his unwearied tongue still catalogued the Great. Yonder was Duchess So and So; that man in the gray fedora was America's foremost comedian; the dyspeptic looking person in shabby tweeds was one of the richest landholders in England; that walking skeleton with the waxen pallor and blue-black mustache was one of the Forty Immortals. The gathering was brilliant, positively brilliant. It was even whispered in embassy circles that a certain Royal Personage — Buckley became impressively the diplomat — a certain Royal Personage whose name he could not divulge, was here incognito.

Ann was bored with their cicerone and his endless beadroll. Had he quitted them earlier, she would have thought of him only with amusement; but now he wore upon her nerves like a hackneyed air or a twice-told tale. Would he never leave them to watch the aëroplanes in peace? As they reached their box she sighted her deliverance. Buckley

announced that he must divorce himself from their society.

"The fact is," he explained "my chief will be here shortly. He is motoring down with some prominent Americans, and counts on me to put him in touch with everything."

"They could not have a more — er — painstaking guide," said Mrs. Blair, boggling a trifle over her choice of adjective and rescuing herself with a fervid, "Could they, Ann?"

But Ann merely smiled. It was an ambiguous smile, to her aunt's thinking; but Buckley found no fault with it. Emanating from the beautiful, not to say rich, Miss Milburn, it seemed to him a sufficient reward, and he bowed himself off in a glow of satisfaction.

"Glory be!" sighed Ann.

"Amen!" said her aunt piously.

And then Buckley — still glowing, still diplomatic, still spouting information — came back. "It just occurred to me," he stated in discreet accents, leaning across the rail, "that you might want to know who's who among your immediate neighbors. The people on your left are in champagne; their cellars are one of the show places of Rheims. Your right-hand neighbor is a Marquise of the old stock, the Faubourg St.-Germain type, while just back of you, by way of contrast, is a grandson of one of Napoleon's Marshals. But the personage I wanted particularly to point out has just come into a box over near the center. Don't turn now, Miss Milburn, for he seems to be struck by your profile; but by and by reconnoiter for a

tallish chap with a pale face and brown eyes, who looks as if he owned the earth. He is related to half the royal houses of Europe, and has a pedigree that makes your head spin to trace. He's an Austrian subject; but his estates lie mainly in lower Hungary, and he is Servian in descent. He is a Prince here, a Duke there, a Count somewhere else, a grandee in Spain, and a few other trifles, and, to top off with, has a very respectable claim to a Balkan throne. Now I'm really going. Au revoir."

"But you haven't told us his name," said Mrs. Blair.

"His full name is too long to recite in one afternoon," laughed Buckley; "but for short he's called Rodoslav, — Prince Rodoslav."

Ann bided her time. After all, there is something piquant in the knowledge that a Prince finds your profile interesting. In such matters even the judgment of the man in the street is not to be despised, while that of a Prince — well, a Prince is doubtless a connoisseur of profiles. Normal women are incurable romanticists, and Ann was more normal than she knew. An aëroplane doubling the nearest pylon gave her her opportunity, and she embraced it with the confidence that had characterized her indirect survey of Oliver Page in the cathedral. But she had to do with a more experienced antagonist now. He was waiting for her to turn, this cousin of half Europe with an eye for profiles, and pierced her armor with a look that sent her to the right about, flushing with such a prodigal outpouring of color as she hoped she had long since outgrown. But this was not all. There was more

than mere amusement in his regard. There was recognition too; for this possessor of many titles was also the dreaming boulevardier she had that morning seen pay military homage to Jeanne d'Arc.

It was this flood of vexing self-consciousness that gave unintentional warmth to her greeting of Virginia Truscott. She did not altogether approve of Mrs. Truscott. Too striking in dress, too pronounced in manner, two emphatic in her amusements, too obviously rich, too lavish of bad French, she summed up a dozen florid defects which may crop out in any nation, but which Europe fondly assumes are specially transatlantic. The assertive pass as the typical, and, viewed from the outside, the American Colony in Paris seemed to find its apt exponent in Mrs. Truscott. Her dinners, her opera parties, her bridge, her golf prizes, her yacht, her motors, her jaunts to Trouville, Cadenabbia, and the Riviera secured the most extended notice in columns that deemed such matters news. Spying them from the promenade, as she passed with the retired stockbroker known to fame as "Virginia Truscott's husband," she whirled tempestuously up the steps to their box and, under cover of Ann's confusion and Mrs. Blair's surprise, showered the embraces of an intimate friend.

"You dear people!" she cried. "Why haven't I seen you before? Don't tell me you've just arrived!"

Mrs. Blair again invoked her Norman alibi. "It was a house party," she added. "We promised weeks ago."

"Normandy! When you might have been at

Rheims!" Mrs. Truscott lifted amazed hands. "You should have broken the engagement. If I had dreamed, I should have insisted that you break the engagement and join my house party here. Eight bedrooms and all full! A big dinner every night! I've had the most interesting people. You would have met all the aviators who are socially possible."

Meanwhile Mrs. Truscott's husband made his unobtrusive greetings. An ashen-faced, gray-haired man in drab clothes, he completely looked the neutral part that Nature, with Mrs. Truscott's assistance, had given him to play. Ann made a humane attempt to draw him out.

"Only to think you've had a whole week of it!" she said, as she shook hands. "Aren't you excited over it?"

Mrs. Truscott spared him a response. "I'm wild about flying," she announced, "simply wild. I mean to go in for it as soon as I make up my mind which 'plane I want. It's bound to be quite the thing sooner or later, and I intend to enjoy the sport before it becomes common. I know I can pick it up easily."

Mrs. Blair's eyes grew round. "Do you mean you will run it yourself?" she cried.

"Of course. Where would be the sport if I didn't? It would be as tame as riding behind a chauffeur in a motor car."

Ann made another attempt with the husband.

"Is she serious?" she asked.

"I dare say," he returned without emotion. "We haven't discussed it."

"Yes," repeated Mrs. Truscott, "I'm going in for it, I have even planned my costume; but I sha'n't describe it. Not to anybody! I don't want an inkling of it to get about. The first thing I knew one of the Rue de la Paix firms would plagiarize the idea. They realize that my costumes are always original. They tell me so frankly."

Ann could readily divine the discreet limits of that frankness. To-day, as always, Virginia's blond charms had a vivid setting. Its motif — to echo the lady's manner of speech — was Directoire; but the modistes of that sprightly period would have had difficulty in recognizing it as the offspring of their fancy. In the brilliance of its greens, the disposition of its lines, — which followed Nature's with loving particularity, — it was essentially Truscottesque. Yet, for the moment, Ann found herself rather envying her offhand disregard of convention, her freedom to follow her whim wheresoever it led. Was she not to fly? In her eagerness to know how Virginia meant to go about this tremendous new hobby she even forgot the connoisseur of profiles.

"Where shall I take lessons?" said Mrs. Truscott. "I don't know. It will depend on the machine I buy. They try them out at different aërodromes. I sha'n't take of anybody but a crack man, and the crack men will all be busy for the next few months, I suppose. Most of them go from here to Brescia, you know, and after that will come the English meetings. It may be winter before I hit upon the right machine and the right man. I mean to take in Brescia, by the way. It may help me make up my mind. I can do it easily; for it's only a short

distance from Cadenabbia, where I go every September. I don't know what I should do without my Septembers at Como. I'm always there by the fifteenth at latest. The people at the Bella Vista say I'm the most regular patron they have. They could almost set their clocks by me. I always have the same suite of rooms overlooking the dear lake. You ought to get the Cadenabbia habit, Mrs. Blair. You really ought. It's simply too delicious in September. One meets everybody one knows."

The elder woman, who knew the precise limits of Mrs. Truscott's social orbit, added mentally, "Or wants to know"; but her thoughts found no reflex in her serene face. Thereupon a red and white diamond took its place upon the signal mast and Mrs. Truscott found a more absorbing interest.

"They're ready to try for the Prix d'Altitude at last," she cried. "Now for the climax of the Grande Semaine!"

The crowd hushed expectantly. Here was indeed the climax, this final contest, the last triumphant proof of man's mastery of the air. Two red disks were hoisted, beside the gay diamond. "Paulhan!" cried a score of voices, and "Paulhan!" uncounted scores echoed as the young pilot, who had sprung from an artisan's bench to fame, drove his roaring biplane into the open and began his long spiral climb. The tribunes had stanch faith in Paulhan. They had ever seen him wing high by choice. Early in the week they had even watched him ride the storm. In great free circles he rose higher and higher into the soft atmosphere of the waning day, and in a

last splendid curve swept past the captive balloon which set the goal and then, gliding down a long spiral earthward, gave place to his rivals.

The white and red triangles of Farman hung upon the signal mast now. Would the low-flying Farman hold his own with Paulhan? If dogged persistence counted, he would. His great flight for the Prix de la Champagne was a vivid memory. Hour upon hour, mile upon mile, in daylight and darkness, he had wheeled round the pylons till he wrested the world's record for distance from Wilbur Wright. Up, up, and still up, his spiral looping back over the heads of the spectators, he mounted, and at last in his turn bore toward the captive sphere which, like a symbol of outworn achievement, seemed purposely moored there to laud the greater glory of this real rival of feathered life. There was an instant of tense waiting; then a swelling cheer. Farman had outclimbed Paulhan! Who could hope to outclimb him?

As with one voice the throng answered, "Latham!" roaring out his name as the earlier dwellers in the land may have hailed their favorite gladiator. If the shades of bygone masters of the soil, Roman or Teuton, still haunt the plains of Gaul, they now beheld an apparition which might have winged its way straight out of their own folklore. Demon, jinn, demigod — their mythology could boast no shape more weird, more graceful, more august, than this fabric of man's own making which swam there aloft in the dusk. Far above its rivals, the noise of its motor lost in distance, swift, sure, an æsthetic delight, it bore witness like nothing else in that week

of marvels that humanity had at last solved the riddle of the centuries.

The wonder of it held Ann in an enchantment which banished every other thought to the outer rim of consciousness. The great crowd turned away as Latham began his descent, and, surging out between the tribunes, scattered to the four quarters of the globe. The Grande Semaine d'Aviation was finished. Virginia Truscott and her indefinite husband bade Ann good night, and she made some sort of response. Justin Blair, accompanied by young Page, returned to the box and said things which she answered. But what any of them talked about or she replied she did not know. Her mind still enshrined the vision. Somewhere, yonder in the dusk, that thing of grace and power still drifted. If she waited, it might return.

And then, when the tribunes were well-nigh deserted and the plain of Bethény was all dusk and mystery, it did return. Winging lower now, heedless of the night as if it flew for sheer joy of flight, the wonderful apparition swam noiselessly from out the darkness and, for a single, unforgettable instant, hung, a great dragon fly in silhouette, against the face of the yellow harvest moon.

Ann drew a breath which was half a sob. "I must," she said, "I must!"

"And so must I!"

The low-voiced echo of her own words drew her to earth. She had moved a little way from the others in her eager peering and had so come unwittingly close to another watcher. In an instant she was her usual self, and her usual self recognized Prince

Rodoslav. At this pass Oliver Page unceremoniously intervened.

"Your uncle says you must really come now, Miss Milburn," he told her. "You'll find it a tedious ride back to Rheims. They make the automobiles go the long way round."

He ignored the Prince; but the latter bowed to him nevertheless.

"Better luck to you next time, Monsieur," he said suavely. "May you also fly across the moon!"

"Thanks," said the American curtly, and turned his back.

Ann moved away with her head held high; but her resentment burned not against Rodoslav, but her protector.

"You know each other?" she asked frigidly.

"I've met him a few times." Page's chin was uncompromisingly square. "He has been among the sheds a good deal this week."

"You speak as if you don't care for him."

"I liked him well enough at first. I hadn't sized him up as the kind of loafer who annoys women."

Ann thawed toward her champion. "You ought not to condemn him by what just happened," she said. "I spoke to myself back there. He probably thought I was addressing him."

"Possibly."

His dry skepticism provoked her to further defense. "I don't know that we ought to judge him by our standards," she suggested. "Perhaps you haven't heard that he's a Prince?"

"Yes," he replied, "I've heard; but the informa-

tion hasn't warped my judgment, and I'd hate to think it swayed yours."

Ann's dudgeon returned and, slipping her arm into her uncle's, she abruptly left this self-appointed mentor to the society of her aunt. Did he think her still the school-girl to whom he had played Sir Oracle? She would show him how trivial a niche in her thoughts he occupied when he said good night!

But it was her niche in Page's thoughts that seemed negligible as they parted company at the wicket. A lift of his shabby cap was his only farewell to her. His last word was to Mrs. Blair.

"No," he said, answering some kindly wish, "I hope I'm not the sort who gives up easily."

"Have you any plans?"

The inventor hesitated. Whereupon Justin, who had appeared not to heed their talk, turned his head and answered for him.

"Page is off at once for Brescia," he announced. "Does that look like giving up?"

CHAPTER IV

After this declaration, it occasioned no surprise in Justin Blair's family when, a few days later, he entered the salon of the apartment in the Avenue du Bois de Boulogne which served as their European *pied-à-terre*, and announced that he also was off for Brescia.

"But I don't advise your coming along," he added bluntly. "It's bound to be a mere side show compared to Rheims."

He wore what his wife styled his "business face," and the habit of years led her to accept his decision without question. "Take heavy clothing," she commented simply. "You know how cool it can turn at night down there under the Alps."

Justin's niece, however, was not minded to surrender Brescia without a protest. Anticlimax though the Italian meeting might prove, she would blithely have undertaken the journey on the chance of living one more such instant as that at Rheims when she saw Latham's dragon fly pass before the face of the harvest moon.

"Do you mean to say you don't care to go, Aunt Helen?" she demanded.

"Do you, dear?" parried the elder woman.

"Not if I'm not wanted, of course."

"I'm not taking the motor," pursued Justin, as if Ann had not spoken. "It's not a pleasure trip. I

am simply going down by train to see young Page make good."

"I hope he will," said Mrs. Blair.

"I know he will," affirmed Justin.

Ann wondered what Oliver Page had had to say or show to her uncle among the sheds at Bethény that could have induced this faith.

"Why do you know?" she queried.

"Because he's Fighting Joe's son," said Justin, and fell into a reverie which she divined had less to do with aëroplanes than some bivouac, march, or battle of the Civil War.

Left in Paris whether she would or not, Ann slaked her thirst for aviation at second hand through the newspapers. She thus learned that Mrs. Truscott, presumably accompanied by her husband, was in regular attendance at Brescia, and among the titled lookers on, whom the press noted with an assiduity worthy of Buckley, read daily the name of Prince Rodoslav. But search as she might, no mention of "Olivier Beauregard" met her eye, and this silence, coupled with the fact that her uncle's letters dealt only with rheumatism and the vagaries of the barometer, made her query whether his heroic parentage was not Page's most solid claim to consideration.

While this doubt was lifting its head she again chanced on Price Buckley. Like many diplomats, he golfed. Who knows what affairs of high import reach solution on the links? Issuing from the pretty clubhouse in the hills beyond Versailles, where only a downpour preventing, Monday and Friday afternoon always found her, Ann collided with the

secretary. The impact was not violent. Clad in a Bond Street golfing suit which, far from detracting from his plumpness, added swelling curves that nature had overlooked, Buckley presented the resilience of an air cushion, and she suffered no greater inconvenience than the loss of one hairpin and the earnest of his society for eighteen holes. In fact, with professional shrewdness, he imposed this latter martyrdom as proof of her forgiveness. If she played with him, he would know his awkwardness pardoned.

As at Rheims, he discoursed freely of the Great, and, since the links for the moment boasted no celebrity of greater magnitude than himself, he resorted to the expedient of recalling the mighty names that adorned the club's membership list. It was a jeweled catalogue.

"My own locker," he concluded modestly, "is just between Jean de Reszke's and a Prince's — the Prince, in fact, whom I pointed out to you at Rheims, if you remember."

"Oh, yes," said Ann, interested at last. "And is he a real Prince ?"

"Assuredly, and a Duke, a Count, and other things, not to mention his claim to the Servian throne."

Ann lifted her club to drive, and Buckley, a stickler for form in all walks of life, preserved the religious silence of the initiate.

"I remember you told me something of the kind the other day," she said as they walked on. "When I asked you if he was a real Prince I wasn't thinking of his titles, but of the man himself."

"It's not an easy task to be a Prince nowadays. So far as I know, Rodoslav measures up to his rôle. Has somebody found fault with him?"

"Mr. Page thought his manner rather," she hesitated an instant, — "well, rather too assured."

"Mr. Page? You mean the — the inventor, the chap whose aëroplane wouldn't go?"

"Yes. He saw something of Prince Rodoslav at Rheims."

Buckley assumed the smile of a doctor of laws who stoops to instruct a kindergarten. "That young man's ideas of royalty seem as rudimentary as — as his flying machine," he said. "He should see more of the Old World before presuming to criticize it. As for Rodoslav's manner, the Almanach de Gotha might modify his snap judgment if he would take a glance at it."

He mentioned the famous authority as if it were holy writ. Ann turned her dancing eyes on the hills.

"That's a kind of royal directory, isn't it?" she asked with sugary innocence. "I must have a look at it myself some day."

"Allow me." Buckley tugged at his hip pocket.

"You carry it with you!"

"Always." He produced the fat, red-covered little volume with a violent jerk. "To a man in my position it is indispensable."

The face of their disgusted caddie said plainly that this was not golf; but the absorbed Buckley left his ball in the ignominious depths of a bunker and fluttered the pages of his sacred volume till he put his finger on the paragraph that was to demolish Oliver Page.

"'Pr.Michel-Alexandre-Constantin-Stephen-Paul,'" he read, "'né le 14 janvier, 1876, Prince de Rodoslav-Nemanya, duc de Kronsbourg, comte de Felsheim, grand d'Espagne de ière classe, chambellan autrichien, chevalier de l'ordre' — but never mind the orders," he broke off, relapsing into English with shortened breath and obvious relief. "You won't be interested, either, to hear about his military rank. He has estates in lower Hungary, a house in Vienna, a villa on the Adriatic, and some kind of ancestral ruin in the Herzegovina. A note refers you to an earlier edition for his genealogy; but I can give you the gist of it from memory."

"You told me he's related to half Europe," said Ann.

"It's true. Hapsburgs, Bourbons, Hohenzollerns, Wittelsbachs, Guelfs, they're all cousins of some sort. But all that is comparatively recent. It's the Serb in him that interests me. He descends from the great Stephen Nemanya, who showed himself the strong man of the Balkans about the time they were building gothic cathedrals in this part of the world. His dynasty lasted something like three centuries altogether; but by and by the little Servian Empire went the way of all Empires and the Turks overran everything. Rodoslav's particular branch of the family lived for a period in the Herzegovina; but when Ottoman rule became too oppressive they migrated to lower Hungary. But they never forgot their nationality, and never abandoned their claim to the Servian throne. It has turned up at intervals all down the line. They're of fighting stock. Austria has used them repeatedly against

the Turks. In fact, one of them was so useful that they gave him the highest reward they could think of and married him to an Archduchess. That's where the Hapsburg-Bourbon strain begins. He's an extraordinary mixture, Rodoslav, and back of all that I've mentioned there is a dash of medieval Greek blood which links him to heaven knows what past in classical antiquity. There isn't a more interesting family tree in Europe. I always see him surrounded by his ancestors. He is a mine of possibilities, a human —"

"A human Almanach de Gotha," suggested Ann, as he groped for an apt figure. "I wonder why he doesn't go in for diplomacy? He would not need to carry that pudgy little book."

Buckley wagged a fat finger at her. "Now you're poking fun at me," he charged. "You think my interest in these people is snobbish."

"No," she protested.

"Well, then puerile, but it isn't. It's a scientific curiosity. Atavism is not fiction. Heredity has played a tremendous part in history. A man like Rodoslav, about whose descent we have fairly accurate data, seems to me the most fascinating study on earth. At any moment he may reincarnate the past."

Ann recalled her uncle's dictum about Price Buckley's latent possibilities. Decidedly he was not all foolishness and blubber.

"Which strain do you think will predominate?" she asked curiously.

"In Rodoslav? Perhaps none. All those conflicting inheritances may neutralize one another.

They did in his father, I'm told. He was merely an idler. It was the worn-out Bourbon stock that seemed to come to the surface in him. They say he even had the Bourbon nose and temperament. His son, luckily, is more the Serb. Stephen Nemanya himself probably had just such brown eyes and hair. They are as Servian as if he had never stepped foot out of Belgrade."

"How much you seem to know about that part of the world! Have you been there?"

"Never, but I hope to go. I wish my work would take me into the Balkans. There are not many corners left in the world where you can find the twentieth century and the Middle Ages side by side. But man proposes and the Department of State disposes. For the present I must content myself with watching stray specimens like Rodoslav and wondering when his wild romanticism will break out. I'm sure it's there."

Ann also was sure it was there. Had she not seen Rodoslav dreaming before the statue of Jeanne d'Arc, fired by Latham's flight across the moon? She found herself thinking rather well of Buckley for his divination of the real Rodoslav. At the same time she thought rather the worse of Page for his hasty inference. A man who took such offhand views of Old World facts might be quite as uncertain in his New World theories. Had he not also failed at Brescia? It was absurd reasoning on her part; but Ann's mental processes seldom squared with logic. She felt a thing first and found a reason or a label for it afterward. Thus now she borrowed a convenient phrase from Buckley, and called her

undoubted and growing interest in Prince Rodoslav a scientific curiosity.

This justified research, and research led her into strange byways. An Almanach de Gotha found its way to her desk; then, after prolonged conference with a bookseller, she added a many-volumed history of Medieval Europe, a collection of Servian poetry done into French, an account of motoring in the Balkans, Gladstone's tract on the Bulgarian massacres, and — an afterthought of her own — a life of Jeanne d'Arc. They made a scholarly row as she aligned them in the frivolous little boudoir with its view of the Arc de Triomphe up the avenue, and she promised herself a course of study unlike anything in her Paris experience or, indeed, in her life anywhere since she escaped the school of cloistral austerity.

In pursuance of this plan she neatly cut the pages of two of the volumes of history and looked at nearly all the excellent photographs in the book that described a motor trip in the Balkans. At this point she recalled an important engagement for tea at Rumpelmeyer's, and her bookish researches in the field of heredity came to a definite end.

But she went on thinking about it, nevertheless. If some miraculous psychologist could have secretly trepanned her pretty head and, in the fractions she abhorred, have tabulated her maiden meditations, he would have decided that quite five-eighths of them had to do with Prince Rodoslav. The remainder, with varying value, concerned fall millinery, aviation, and Oliver Page. Something not unlike this did, in fact, happen to Ann before she was many

days older, and the adept who performed the delicate operation chanced to belong to the same profession as Price Buckley.

Baron Saccarello did not resemble Buckley, however. Though his head had gone bald and his eyebrows and vast mustache had turned from black to gray and from gray to white in the diplomatic service of Italy, the word diplomacy rarely crossed his lips. He was so old that legend already made free with him. When men pointed him out, they mentioned that he had sat at the feet of Cavour, confounded Napoleon III, outwitted Disraeli, and more than held his own with Bismarck. They added that publishers had offered a King's ransom for his memoirs. But he had always resisted temptation. Not a line had he written. Not a line, if he kept his sanity, would he write. When he died the inner meaning of a long period of tortuous statecraft, the very soul of history, would perish with him. Cavour, Disraeli, Bismarck, had known what he knew and locked their lips. He would not falter where such as they had kept faith.

Plenipotentiary in his prime at half a dozen different courts of the first rank, he now represented Italy at none; but, though others bore the titular honors, it was believed that his relations with the Quirinal were never closer. When the knowing chanced upon him, now in Paris, now in London, now in Petersburg, they told one another that Italy had important fish to fry and had sent her master chef to superintend the cooking. Such, in part, was the legend.

All the wiseacres actually saw was a very old and

apparently very idle old man. When Saccarello paid his visits to the great capitals he seemed to have nothing more pressing in hand than dinners, shooting parties, and the indulgence of his lifelong passion for opera. During his present sojourn in Paris he had varied his usual program with a pilgrimage to Rheims, but, Aviation Week past, four o'clock in the afternoon always saw him posted before his favorite café on the Boulevard des Capucines, while the stroke of nine found him with his sound ear tilted toward the orchestra. When he followed his preference he went to the Opéra Comique; but one reason or another frequently took him to the National, and it was here, three days after the game of golf, that Price Buckley with baited breath pointed him out to Ann and Mrs. Blair.

CHAPTER V

Ann's aunt had yielded to her periodic craving for "Rigoletto." She could not say how many times she had heard it. In music — fashion and critics to the contrary — she swore by the Italians, and this opera was her special favorite. It had also been a favorite of Justin Blair's up to a certain point. That point he had reached on or about the twentieth occasion when he beheld the vengeance of heaven overtake the terrible buffoon. Thereafter he procured a substitute or napped peacefully on the sofa in the rear of the box. Despite her white hair, Mrs. Blair felt that a man belonged somewhere in the background of a Continental opera box, and hence it was, Brescia still detaining Justin, that her choice had fallen on the Secretary of Legation. Thus it was also that Buckley, repaying his hostess in the coin he deemed most acceptable, called the roll of notables and, as the bright, particular star of a firmament of signal brilliance, drew their attention to Saccarello.

"Quite the most distinguished figure in the diplomatic world," he assured them. "He is a survival, the last link connecting us with Disraeli and Bismarck and Cavour." He proceeded to revamp the legend. "And a most delightful man to know," he could not help adding. "He is in the bad graces of every hostess, however. The men will never go

back to the drawing-room while there is a possibility of another story from Baron Saccarello."

"So you know him?" said Ann demurely.

Buckley met the test. "I've run across him at embassy functions."

"He is looking this way," she persisted cruelly. "Perhaps he'll recognize you."

The secretary coughed and made dispositions for an orderly retreat. "His eyesight isn't what it was," he dropped carelessly. "He is an octogenarian, you know."

Ann gave her thumbscrew another twist. "But he'll surely recognize a fellow diplomat," she said.

"Oh, as for that," flushed Buckley, "I'm not an old stager, you see. I have only met him on occasions when —" He stopped as if electrified and achieved a sweeping bow.

He had been recognized! The great doyen of his profession had dropped him a gracious nod across the golden horseshoe. In the glittering publicity of the Opéra he had been greeted by Baron Saccarello! He was dizzy with happiness. It was the supreme moment of his life. He had received his accolade!

Ann decided to be generous. "It must be tremendously interesting to know such a man," she said, studying the grim personage who could cause palpitations in even the masculine breast. "But I should be rather afraid of him, I think."

"So should I," agreed her aunt. "He looks like an old vulture."

Buckley recovered his breath. "You forget that surface austerity when he talks to you," he explained indulgently. "He puts you instantly at ease."

The house darkened and the second act began; but Buckley still oriented toward the spot where Saccarello's bald pate glowed faintly in the gloom, and hugged the remembrance of his splendid moment. Ambitious dreams built themselves on that slender foundation. One of them he dared hope might see its fulfillment during the next entr'acte. It had satisfied him to the marrow that Ann, who mocked and beguiled him by turns, should have witnessed his triumph. She had been surprised into a betrayal of her real feeling, the adorable minx! She had shown her latent respect for his position, for the attainments that put it within his power to know such men. What a final subjugating stroke if he could casually present her to the colossus!

Rigoletto reached and delivered himself of his great outburst, and the curtain fell. Buckley, on guard, saw the Baron leave his box, and at once bent toward Mrs. Blair and suggested a turn in the foyer.

"After all, that's partly what we come for," he said, with the air of a laughing philosopher from whom humanity can hide no foible. "I always observe the rite."

Saccarello was hanging over a balustrade above the grand staircase when they sighted him.

"More like a bird of prey than ever," declared Mrs. Blair, perceiving that the toilets of the ascending and descending women were not beneath the Italian's notice. "I'm sure he must be a very dreadful old man."

Their escort recalled and omitted to narrate sundry episodes of a feminine nature that had their part in the Saccarello legend. He had had his dis-

Saccarello bent upon Ann's fresh young shoulders a look of frank approval.

tractions, the Baron; but they had never run away with him. Gossip accredited him with the dictum that women made useful agents, but mad principals, in the diplomatic scheme of things. There could be no exceptions, not even Queens.

As they passed, the great man turned and, observing Buckley, nodded again and, with the shadow of a smile lurking in the jungle of his piratical mustache, put out his hand. The secretary paled slightly, met the noncommittal handclasp with a grasp that erred perhaps on the score of cordiality, and, seizing his heaven-sent opportunity, presented the Italian to his companions. Saccarello bowed from the waist and bent upon Ann's fresh young shoulders a look of frank approval.

"Naturally you are aware that your gown matches your eyes," he said. "Strike that note whenever you can. It's impossible to better it."

It was the last thing in the world she would have expected from a man who had matched his wits against Bismarck, and she colored like a schoolgirl. Was this what Price Buckley called putting one at ease? Then moving on at her side, he launched a philippic against present-day fashions which made her laugh, forget her embarrassment, and, before they had gone half the circuit of Garnier's florid hall, meet his absurdities with spirited denial. With her restored confidence came the discovery that she had to do with an ideal conversationalist. Young men made conversation a monologue and thrust their callow opinions upon you whether you would or not. Saccarello, who really had things to say, things the world would have been on tiptoe to hear, effaced

himself and was all boyish eagerness to see with her eyes. In a word, the trepanning had begun.

Price Buckley, far in their wake, was astounded at her fluency. She had never chattered on at that rate with him. He made repeated efforts to overtake them which his companion's interest in her surroundings always thwarted. Longing to join the colloquy ahead, he was forced to fritter away the precious opportunity in discussing tedious nobodies whose gowns struck Mrs. Blair's questing eye. What the deuce could Miss Milburn be finding to say to Saccarello? A girl who could hold her own with such a man would grace the head of any diplomat's table! He had a brief, rose-colored vision of a social item beginning "The Ambassador and Mrs. Buckley entertained —" Just as they forsook the foyer he seized a fragment of a sentence that warmed his heart. "History . . . in the light of heredity . . ." — that was all; but it was enough. He knew who had set her thinking along that line. Dear girl! They should have many a talk about such things hereafter. He had had no notion that the carelessly flung seed had fallen in such fertile soil.

Old Saccarello, a gouty limp notwithstanding, attended them quite to their box, and made again his supple courtier's bow as he watched them through the little door. The hovering ouvreuse waited for Buckley to follow; but as the young man would have said good night the Italian made a tentative gesture toward the rotunda.

"The signal has not gone yet," he said. "May I offer you a liqueur?"

The secretary doubted his ears; but Saccarello's

gesture was graphic, and he made a husky noise in his throat signifying his assent. Whereupon, — honor of honors, — the great Italian slipped his arm in Buckley's and piloted that short-breathed, but transcendently happy young man toward the buffet. So linked, their intimacy advertised to the world, they entered the populous rotunda and made deliberate choice of a seat. Facing the Baron across the scant diameter of their table, — as Bismarck and Disraeli and Cavour had doubtless confronted him, — the rising diplomatist had a moment of becoming humility.

This passed. There was a seductive implication in Saccarello's manner that he saw beneath the plump exterior of his companion a Coming Man, a Force in the New Order, whom it behooved the wise to cultivate. This rarefied flattery, the quintessence of compliment, had a most heady effect. It would not have surprised Buckley had the Italian plainly stated that he knew the brains of a legation when he met it — he all but put it into words. It would not have startled him had this wizard of vast experience and clairvoyant judgment ignored his chief and broached a delicate affair of state.

But Saccarello did not sound him upon a preferential treaty or bring up the incident of the hour. He spoke of Ann Milburn's beauty. He mentioned her eyes again, turned a not unpoetic phrase upon her mouth, and then, with an abrupt drop into prose, made her teeth the vehicle of a tribute to American dentistry.

"And marvelous shoulders," he added in his outspoken Latin way. "I have not seen such a pair of

shoulders in Paris since the '60's. There was a belle of the Second Empire, an imperial favorite, a frail Florentine — " He paused and mused over his cognac.

"Yes?" said Buckley. His American rearing made the frank appraisal of Ann's person seem indelicate; but he did most emphatically want to hear that story.

"Who had such shoulders," completed Saccarello abruptly, and the tale of the frail Florentine ended.

Buckley relaxed in his seat. "Miss Milburn has also a superior intelligence," he remarked penitently, lifting the discussion to a higher plane. "She will chatter small talk with you, like any natural young woman; but that is merely the social mask. I've had glimpses of her real self."

"Ah!"

The monosyllable might have meant anything. Buckley fancied, however, that it was tinged with a certain cynicism toward Ann's whole sex. There was no detaching Saccarello from his legend.

"Yes," he pursued, eager to do her complete justice, "you have only to strike the right note, and the real woman will respond. Her range is as exceptional as her advantages. She has been everywhere, had everything that money can buy. Her uncle's fortune," he made and rejected calculations, "is immense."

"Railroads?" queried Saccarello idly.

"Railroads, copper, oil — everything. It was lumber in the beginning."

"That sounds American."

"It is, very. Justin Blair's story is so typical that

it's threadbare. He came out of the Civil War virtually penniless; but somehow — he and his wife's brother, Miss Milburn's father — borrowed a little money and put it into Michigan forests. He swung an ax himself at first, worked shoulder to shoulder with his men. To-day, as we say over there, he has money to burn. He probably doesn't know the amount of his income."

"So," said Saccarello, as his companion conceived Bismarck might have uttered it. "And his niece, does she enjoy the same delightful uncertainty?"

"That's the common impression. Her parents died when she was very young. It's not conceivable that Justin Blair would let her interests suffer."

"No," said the old man dryly. "I think we may safely assume the existence of a respectable dot. Are her affections engaged?"

Buckley colored, and, furious with himself for such undiplomatic behavior, reddened deeper still. "I have no reason to think so," he answered. "A girl in her position would not be apt to choose hastily."

"True," agreed Saccarello, rising. "It will take a man out of the ordinary to interest her." His half whimsical smile seemed to add, "Such a man as you!"

They left, as they had entered, arm in arm; but the black-garbed ouvreuse who waddled down the corridor to meet them was now the sole witness of Buckley's apotheosis.

"Present my apologies to the ladies for detaining you," said the Italian at the box door. "For that matter, I owe them to you as well."

"My dear Baron —"

"I don't meet you younger men often, you see. I must seize my opportunities as they come. Good night."

The stout ouvreuse jangled her keys impatiently; but Buckley stood reverently watching till the turn of the corridor shut the great man from view. Then, with a sigh of perfect contentment, he reëntered the darkened box.

Saccarello, on the contrary, bestowed no more of his evening upon Rigoletto. He tarried only to secure his hat and coat. Five minutes after he vanished from Buckley's view he issued into the Place de l'Opéra and bade the carriage attendant summon a motorcab. The man became a jumping-jack of activity.

"What address, Monsieur le Baron?" he asked as he deferentially held the door.

Saccarello yawned indifferently. "Oh, tell him the Champs Élysées, the Bois, anything," he replied. "I need a breath of air."

As they swung round into the boulevard beyond observation, the chauffeur received a fresh command. "Seventy-nine, Rue de Grenelle," called the passenger crisply. "And be quick about it!"

Balked of what promised to be a lavish fare, the man confided to his steering wheel that the ancient behind was both a wretched camel and a pickle; but he obeyed orders and shot through the Place de la Concorde at a speed that roused the ire, but eluded the interference, of the police. Saccarello, as was his habit, turned his head to glance at the second fountain. It grimly amused him, the friend of many Kings, to remember that on that spot one of them

had parted company with his anointed head. Crossing the bridge, he yielded to another habit. The water front spread its wonted spectacle; but of the myriad lights he singled out only the inconspicuous group in the rear of the house of Napoleonic memories which to-day shelters the German Embassy. That too gave him ironical amusement.

The left bank gained, and a clear stretch of boulevard before, they tore past the Deputies and the Ministry of War, struck at a sharp angle into the narrow Rue de Bellechasse, skirted still another ministry, and, entering Grenelle at last, that street of graceful memories and storied dwellings, now given over to officialdom, came with a purr of slackening mechanism to a halt before a courtyard which the stroke of midnight, just sounding, should have peopled with ghosts in periwigs and brocades. There was a porter at the gate who looked like Major Pendennis; but he was not English, and, though he greeted the caller in French, he was not a Frenchman. Nor, despite its setting, despite its builders, despite its ghosts of the old régime, was the house itself French. Its soil, even, was alien territory. The arms carved just beneath its pediment were the arms of Russia.

As Saccarello limped up the red-carpeted steps, he was met by a footman who divested him of his coat and ceremoniously threw open the door of an antechamber. French workmen had wrought its woodwork and wreathed its stucco garlands. French artists had painted the chubby cupids and impossible landscapes of its panels; yet somehow the room was no longer French. Portraits of the Czar

and Czarina, a jeweled icon, a painting showing the Neva in wintertime, and a remarkable Byzantine mosaic served to stamp it with the character of its owner.

But Saccarello's wait here was brief. A second door opened, and a man far younger than the visitor advanced with quick step to greet and lead him to the inner chamber. Russia spoke here with still more emphasis. The desk, the bookshelves, the chairs, were massive and ornate. The scent of a Russian cigarette pervaded every corner. On a taboret stood a lighted samovar, toward which the master of the house made an immediate gesture.

"Tea, Baron?"

"No, thank you."

"A liqueur, then? A cigarette?"

Saccarello drew from his pocket a villainously rolled cigar, which could have originated nowhere save below the Alps.

"Nothing but this," he said, and, accepting a light, blew an evil smelling cloud through his mustache. "I've met her," he laconically announced.

The Russian smiled. "You lost no time," he said.

"I am too old to lose time."

"And will she serve, La Belle Americaine?"

Saccarello answered with a question. "You were an attaché in Washington for a time, I believe?"

"Yes."

"Could you — a Russian — ever accurately predict what an American woman would say or do?"

"Never."

"Neither can I — an Italian. I know the Latins, you the Slavs, and we both in a measure understand

the Germans and the English; but the women over there," his gesture crossed the Atlantic, "that strange land of yeast and electricity," — a smoke cloud followed, — "riddles, my dear Ambassador, riddles! And they begin so young!"

"They're barbarians," declared the Russian. "The merest trinkets amuse them."

Saccarello shook his head. "Not always, if you're thinking of titles," he said. "One will jump at a bogus Vicomte, another turn her shoulder on royalty. Speaking of shoulders, our fair American is well equipped. I've seen nothing like them since the Countess de Castiglione's day."

The younger man laughed. "If *you* admire them —" He left his sentence eloquently incomplete. "But what are her other qualifications to distract Prince Hamlet from dangerous dreams?"

"Fine features, a superb complexion, a pair of eyes totally different from his own, a tantalizing insouciance, — the American sort, — and a warm romantic interest in Hamlet himself."

"You are sure of that? There was only the cathedral episode and the little encounter at the end of the day."

"It was enough. She has been rummaging in Servian history; she would 'love' to motor in the Balkans; she thinks genealogy fascinating; she wonders how a man feels whose ancestors wore a crown. In fact, she all but mentioned Rodoslav's name. Yes, my friend, she is interested. And she would distract him, take my word for it. There is more than the surface froth. Master Buckley was right there."

"Buckley?"

"The young cub they have taken on at the American Embassy."

"Ah, yes. The fat youth."

"Exactly. I commend him to you for amusement."

And with that tribute the budding diplomat dropped out of the conversation.

The Russian lit a fresh cigarette and eyed it thoughtfully. "She'll not hold him long," he predicted. "The others —"

"The others were not American," Saccarello took him up. "They all ended by boring him, and when he was bored he reacted. This present activity is a reaction."

"A perilous reaction."

The Italian nodded. "The word is none too strong," he assented. "There is nothing so tenacious of life as a lost cause. It is logic proof. It exists."

"He wouldn't lack followers."

"Especially now, when Austria — but we have threshed out all that."

"Precisely," said the Russian, and there was silence.

The old man mused. "If he were only more like his father!" he sighed. "As long as there were pretty women in the world, he didn't care a fig for politics. But our problem takes after his grandfather. It was always action and reaction with that man. He mixed in the War of Greek Independence out of pique with a Viennese opera singer. Luckily a beautiful Rumanian took his fancy before he did

any real mischief. When her novelty wore off, hostilities were over."

"If history would repeat itself!"

"Perhaps it will. Unfortunately, Rodoslav doesn't exactly repeat his grandfather. Mere looks aren't sufficient to interest him. But I have hopes of the American. She is immature; but behind her blue eyes there is an idea or two, caprice, and, let's hope, a bit of temper. Yes, Hamlet will be kept occupied."

"Hamlet doesn't seem blindly infatuated yet. Rheims promised well, and the inquiries he made later — but then, off he pops to Brescia. La Belle Milburn shares his affections with flying machines, it appears."

Saccarello looked at his watch and rose. "Perhaps he'll buy an aëroplane and break his neck," he said hopefully.

There was a discreet tap at the door and a servant entered with a blue envelope on a heavy salver, presented it in silence, and in silence withdrew. The Russian excused himself, slit the envelope, consulted a cipher code, and then glanced over at Saccarello with a smile.

"Nothing could be more apropos," he said. "This is from an attaché of our Roman embassy who is in Brescia. He telegraphs me that Prince Hamlet has bought an aëroplane."

The old man broke into grim laughter. "We'll rechristen him," he declared. "Let us call him Prince Icarus now — and may he meet the same satisfactory end!"

The Russian smiled vaguely. "My Greek my-

thology is rusty," he confessed. "I remember that Icarus went in for aëronautics in an amateurish way; but just what did become of him?"

"He flew too high and the sun melted his wings," reminded Saccarello. "His end," he grinned cheerfully — "his end was spectacular. He fell into the sea."

CHAPTER VI

THE meeting at Brescia presently reached its close without reversing the verdict that Rheims had passed upon Oliver Page. The household in the Avenue du Bois looked daily for the return of its disillusionized head; but instead of Justin Blair came the telegram: "Pack for Italy. See letter."

"Which will be as bald as his message," predicted Ann.

It was a true prophecy. Stripped of superscription and signature, Justin's epistle ran: "Delayed here. Want my family. Have engaged quarters Bella Vista Hotel, Cadenabbia." All else was left to conjecture.

Mrs. Blair did not conjecture. She consulted a Bradshaw.

"Suppose we take the Mont Cenis route this time," she said. "There is a good night train."

Ann swung her foot. "I hate trains," she declared. "Why couldn't he have told us to bring the motor?"

"I don't know, my dear." Mrs. Blair was jotting final memoranda.

"And why Cadenabbia? And if Cadenabbia, why the Bella Vista?"

"Is there anything wrong with the Bella Vista? It has a lovely situation as I remember it."

"I should like to go to one spot on earth where I would not meet Virginia Truscott."

Her aunt laughed. "I don't believe that spot exists," she said. "Are you sure the Bella Vista is her stopping place?"

"Have you forgotten her brag? She's invariably there by the fifteenth! The hotel could set its clocks by her! She always has the same suite of rooms overlooking the dear lake!"

The elder woman gathered up her notes. "We needn't see more of her than we like," she consoled.

Ann's pessimism would not lift. "It's never what other people like with Virginia Truscott," she asserted; "it's what she likes. She — she pervades space. But I don't believe you mind her in the least."

Her aunt withdrew her eyes from the little Dresden marquise who curtsied to her from across the broad desk. "I was thinking of the sunsets and the oleanders," she confessed. "They pervade the Italian lakes for me."

Nevertheless, it had to be admitted that Virginia Truscott did strike a note at Cadenabbia one could not ignore. They encountered her by the shore with their first sunset, and the shifting miracle of lake and cloud and gilded peaks became forthwith a secondary consideration. Her welcome had a breeziness that all but stirred the leaves of the plane trees overhead.

"I'm delighted, overjoyed, positively beside myself!" she cried, kisses punctuating her greeting. "You will redeem Cadenabbia. There are so few here this year one really cares about! You look

too sweet for words, Ann, in that Copenhagen blue, and gray is so becoming to you, Mrs. Blair! I met your husband several times in Brescia; but he never breathed a syllable about your coming here till the last day of the meeting. He kept among the sheds most of the time. He must believe there is money in aëroplanes. I joked him about it. I told him I wanted to be let in on the ground floor when he formed his aëroplane trust; but he only said, 'Humph!' and began talking Steel Common to Mr. Truscott."

"And is Mr. Truscott in Cadenabbia?" asked Mrs. Blair perfunctorily, her glance turned wistfully toward the view she so much preferred to Virginia's flame colored gown.

"Rather! He looks forward to it all the year."

"I shouldn't have supposed he cared for scenery," said Ann.

"He doesn't. Not a button! It's the fishing. Fishing is almost a monomania with him, dear man! He even fishes in Paris. Really! He will go and stand down by the Pont de l'Alma by the hour. The hotel management here pleases him better than it did. They've taken his advice and opened a bar just off the billiard room. They serve forty-seven different drinks. Sounds almost like a pickle advertisement, doesn't it? Mr. Truscott says he believes there really are pickles in some of them. Still, it's a beginning, and I tell him not to make discouraging criticisms. He finds it hard, of course; for I don't suppose there is a better judge of cocktails in New York than my husband. Cocktails, fishing, and bridge — those are his grand passions. Speak-

ing of grand passions, I'm still mad about flying. I have almost decided on the machine I'll buy; but I am saying nothing about it. I don't want the newspapers to know yet. They'll be bothering me with reporters. They're always bothering me, for that matter. The only way I can deal with them is to have my interviews typed beforehand. Then I'm not made to say things I never dreamed of saying, or wear things I wouldn't put on my back. Isn't it tiresome? But to come back to flying, I met some one in Brescia who is as keen about it as I am. He's the most aristocratic thing I ever saw."

She paused to take breath and adjust a blond curl which, being of the detachable variety, was given to strange vagaries, and Ann exchanged speaking glances with her aunt. Mrs. Truscott's "aristocrats" were a byword. When Comte met Marquis in her ornate salon they smiled like augurs. She had fed and lent money to more titled humbugs than any woman in the American colony of Paris.

But, as her next words proved, she for once lavished her facile homage on the genuine article.

"I mean Prince Rodoslav," she explained. "I met him in the simplest way imaginable. I was looking at a particular machine and wondering whether I wanted it, when the Prince came up. We both knew the aviator and he introduced us. We were friends immediately. There is nothing standoffish about him. His manner couldn't be more natural. Yet all the while you feel that he's somebody. He has the royal memory one hears about. He said he saw me at Rheims. He even told me what I wore. But you don't seem half as

impressed as you ought," she broke off. "Surely you've heard of Prince Rodoslav!"

Ann kept her own counsel; but the repetition of the name set Mrs. Blair's memory vibrating.

"I'm sure I have," she answered. "Was he — you'll remember, Ann — one of the people Mr. Buckley pointed out at Rheims?"

"But he pointed out so many, Aunt Helen." It was a trifling deception; but it seemed mountainous at the moment, and Ann's face grew warm.

"What a color this air has given you already, dear," observed Mrs. Truscott. "I wish I could respond to a change of climate like that. But it's rather shabby of you not to be certain about the Prince. He remembered you. In fact, it was while I sat in your box that he noticed me. He asked what you were like. Don't you wish you knew what I told him? I don't think he has known many Americans. At least, he seems curious about us. Somehow your name came up every time we met. The last time I saw him — it was just after Mr. Blair told me you were coming here — I mentioned that I expected to meet you in Cadenabbia. Fancy my surprise when he said that he was bound for Cadenabbia too, and hoped we should soon see each other again."

"And have you?" Mrs. Blair was frankly interested.

"Not yet; but of course we shall. This isn't Paris. It will be amusing to watch some of the people here when they discover that I know him. The place is full of snobs."

Ann longed for solitude. He was coming here to

see *her*, this storybook Prince who filled her thoughts! She knew it as surely as if he had sent her word. What had this woman said of her? What fantastic picture had she drawn? Did he think her a second Virginia Truscott? But she could not believe this. He had tolerated the feather headed creature as a means to an end. He would not delay till the social machinery of Paris could bring them together. He was resolved to know her at once. Here — somewhere — he awaited her coming. The future beckoned to her with a gesture she knew not whether to welcome or fear.

With a vague shrinking, she slipped her arm within Mrs. Blair's. "I think I'm tired, Aunty," she said. "Shall we go back?"

Mrs. Truscott turned with them. "Where he'll stop I don't know," she added. "He did not say, and I couldn't very well ask. Probably he's to be a guest in one of the villas. I can't associate him with a modern hotel. It doesn't suit him. He needs a pictorial setting. He belongs," she hesitated over her picture and then found inspiration in the rose burdened gateway of the Villa Carlotta, "he belongs in there."

Ann, glancing through the ironwork of the gate, silently agreed. He did belong in that high seated fabric to which the old terraces with their leaping fountain gave such noble approach. He belonged in its eighteenth century atmosphere as he belonged in the Renaissance, the Middle Ages, and a dozen vivid backgrounds of the past. He harmonized with all scenes that had historic color and fragrance. He was at home in all ages. He would live — had

she known it — in ages yet to come. He was deathless! He was Romance!

And thereupon, in the setting they had chosen for him, he appeared.

"Of all the coincidences!" gasped Mrs. Truscott. "If he isn't coming down the steps!" Then, grappling with opportunity, she enjoined, "Admire the lake — anything — and you'll meet him now. It's a splendid chance." Her companions, however, were retracing their steps, and she had no option but to follow. "Perhaps your plan is better," she said, overtaking them. "He may be conceited enough to think we knew he was there and were waiting for him to come out."

Stung by the same thought, Ann's temper slipped its leash. "Our only plan, Mrs. Truscott," she flashed, "is to dress for dinner."

Mrs. Blair pressed the girl's arm warningly. "It really is late," she put in with pacific intent; "later than I supposed. I'm always losing track of time in Italy."

But Virginia Truscott, thick skinned in general, for once took affront. "It was solely on your account, Ann, that I suggested waiting," she retorted. "I have no need to scheme for introductions myself."

A gate clanged behind them and a rapid step took their own direction. Ann, knowing her aunt's limitations as a walker, suddenly released her arm, and, with all the speed she could compass with dignity, pressed on ahead. She had scarcely left them before she heard Rodoslav overtake and greet Mrs. Truscott and then, after an instant of formalities, address

Mrs. Blair. Disgust made her picture Virginia as a nauseating blend of deference and triumph. She should never present her, Ann Milburn! She was grimly resolved upon that.

But her very haste betrayed her. She was not shod for emergencies like this, and a heel built for drawing-rooms, not highroads, became the contemptible instrument of her undoing. The despicable object dropped off slyly. No lurch or sprain or pity compelling accident attended its base desertion. She was merely absurd. Somewhere in the dust behind lay the wretched thing; but she would not deign to turn. With her right foot on tiptoe she held to her haughty course, praying all the gods in her pantheon that her limp and the missing heel might alike go unnoticed. Save Cupid, the gods were apparently inattentive. Her sensitive ear caught Virginia Truscott's laugh, her aunt's exclamation, and then a masculine pursuit.

"Mademoiselle — your pardon!"

Beaten, she turned and faced him. One hand held his hat, in the other balanced the vile cause of her humiliation. To his everlasting credit, Rodoslav did not smile. Even his eyes were grave. So circumstanced, Virginia Truscott ran them down and regularized their acquaintance. Ann, with the hauteur of a monarch by divine right, bent her head. The Prince, with the humility of the subject, bowed from the waist.

"Do let me send a *carrozza*," he entreated. "I shall pick one up soon."

"Don't trouble yourself," said Her Majesty. "I can walk."

"But should you?" He waved the heel in mute argument as he gave it back. "It would be awkward, even dangerous."

"Dangerous! To the Bella Vista?" Her glance traveled toward the haven she had all but gained. "I can hardly believe it."

"The Bella Vista," he repeated. "That alters matters." With a second bow, which was no more hers than the others, he went his way.

Ann dropped the heel as if it were a toad.

"I should think you'd want to keep it for a souvenir," said Virginia, staring. "It makes me think of Cinderella." Getting no response, she added to Mrs. Blair, "In fact, it all seems a fairy tale. Who dreamed he would pop out of the Villa Carlotta, where we'd just said he belonged? I presume he's related to the Duke of Saxe-Meiningen, who owns it. He's everybody's cousin, you know."

"You were rude to Mrs. Truscott," Ann's aunt told her in mild rebuke as they reached their rooms.

"I hate her!"

"But she meant well. There was no occasion to be so short with her. For that matter, I think you were short with Prince Rodoslav."

"I meant to be," avowed the amazing girl. "I hate him too."

Mrs. Blair diagnosed the case as travel strain and suggested that they dine upstairs; but Ann demurred, and they went below in full panoply. The night was as soft as midsummer, and the air spiced with the fragrance of the dusky garden beyond. That semi-tropic perfume, the music, the food with

its suggestions of chestnut and anise, the fruits, grapes, guavas, purple figs — all helped weave the spell of Italy. Caressed by it, Ann thought less bitterly of Virginia Truscott, and with no bitterness at all of the other offender. He had, after all, behaved very well in that ridiculous business of the slipper. She wished she had not thrown the heel away. Virginia was right. It would have been a souvenir worth keeping. And Virginia — well, her foibles harmed nobody. Swayed by these mellow, if inconsistent, reflections, she smiled on that sumptuous woman as she passed with her neutral tinted husband, whereupon Virginia, who never bore grudges, beamed warmly in return, and the incident of the highroad — as regards herself and Ann — was definitely closed.

As regards Ann and her neighbor of the Villa Carlotta, life seemed less easy of adjustment. She was not altogether content with herself. She had demonstrated that she was not recklessly eager to meet him. Surely he had no doubts of that! But had she not overshot the mark and convinced him she was hardly worth his while to know? If her indulgent aunt thought her short with him, she must have been nothing less than shrewish. The music, the lights, the idle chatter roundabout, fretted her. She longed to take her self-questionings into the languorous, scented mystery of the Italian night.

Presently her chance came. As they rose from table Virginia Truscott's husband came up to persuade Mrs. Blair to take a hand at whist, and Ann had no sooner seen her aunt assume what she, who

loathed cards, called the "bridge face," than she made her escape to the garden.

It was wonderfully peaceful under the stars and the young moon. Their light rained like a silver benison on the gleaming lake and the vague masses of the wooded shore. Only an aspiring poplar here and there stood out distinct against the night. No fellow-guest intruded upon her privacy. It might have been her personal domain. For her alone the mystery and the stillness, the starlight, the peace, the haunting fragrance of oleander and rose, of orange, and pungent box.

She surrendered herself to its witchery. Her steps led her where they would. So it was, through no volition of her own, that she found herself beside the barrier beyond which lay the formal magnificence of the villa. There was a seat here, a bench of yellowed marble, still warm from the sun, and, sinking upon it, she lifted her face toward the heavens. But her gaze stopped short of the zenith. It paused at the coping of the villa wall, where, smiling down on her, sat Rodoslav.

"I have waited for you," he said simply. "I knew you would come."

CHAPTER VII

She stared up at him for a long moment without stirring. He was an unreal figure there in the moonlight, and his words, as fantastic as his apparition, intensified rather than dissolved her doubt. It was surely her imagination, bewitched by the night, that installed Rodoslav upon that strange perch. Yet he was a vivid illusion. Clad precisely as she had seen him at sundown, his lips faintly smiling, his brown eyes searching her own, he displaced atmosphere like a being of flesh and blood.

"Yes, I'm real," he said, as if he read her thoughts. "I'm as substantial as this wall."

Ann awoke. "Do you often choose such seats?" she asked, and then, with an echo of his own words, added, "It looks awkward, even dangerous."

"There is a terrace on this side. The only danger lies in your direction."

It seemed a feeble attempt at gallantry and Ann, rising, prepared to nip further flights with a prompt good night.

"You must not go!" he protested quickly. "That was a statement of fact, not a banality. You mocked me; but I was not mocking you in return. Let us be direct with each other. We have no time for the trivial fencings men and women resort to

"Destiny!" she repeated. "Does any one still believe in Destiny?"

when they are strangers. You will understand that presently. I'll make it all clear. I am coming down to you now."

A shiver of apprehension crisped her skin. "You must not!" she answered. "I cannot stay!"

But he swung himself over the wall by the limb of a low hanging ilex and dropped at her side. "The strangeness of it will soon pass," he said, his gesture entreating her to resume her seat. "After all, we know each other. Somewhere in time — I don't know when, but somewhere — we talked together in such a garden, under such a sky. I know it, as I knew, when your eyes met mine in the cathedral at Rheims, that our lives would join. You thought you came there to look at tapestries, stained glass, dead stones; but you did not. You came because Destiny sent you."

"Destiny!" she repeated wonderingly. "Does any one still believe in Destiny?"

He gave her a strange reply. "I believe in Destiny," he said, "as I believe in miracles and the saints in Zeus and Athene, in Pan and the dryads, in all the gods of all the men I have ever been."

She might have doubted his sanity had he not ended with a smile. "I see," she smiled back. "You're a poet."

Her answer pleased him. "Had you been one sort of modern woman, you would have talked to me of ancestral memory and quoted Herbert Spencer or Max Nordau. If you were another sort, you would simply have gathered up your skirts and run away. Thank God, thank all the gods, you're the happy medium!"

"I must run away now, however."

"Why? You are not bound by convention. If you are seen here with me, the utmost they will say is that you are an American. A woman or so might shrug; but with the shrug will go secret envy. It is because you have shaken off our Old World fetters that I have taken a short cut to friendship. Don't tell me I have made a mistake, that you are a slave to good form after all. Be seated again, I beg you. I have many things to say to you before you go. Whether at this moment you believe it or not, we are to see much of each other. I am as certain of it as I was that we should meet here to-night."

"You were certain! How could you be?"

"I cannot tell you. It was like Rheims. I knew you would come. It was predestined. Will you not take your seat and listen to me? We are wasting precious time."

She was stubbornly resolved not to take the seat he urged upon her. If will power — she scouted the idea of Destiny — had brought her, all unwitting, to this fantastic interview, she would prove herself capable of thwarting it. Yielding in the prime affair, she woman-like made a triviality the test of her existence as a free agent.

"I'd rather walk," she returned; "but I can listen too."

"As you will." And they moved on. "What do you know about me?" he asked abruptly.

Ann hesitated. After all, what did she know? What had Price Buckley's gossip and the Almanach de Gotha told her of the man at her side? "The things anybody may know," she replied. "You

who inherit titles are like famous pictures or sculptures or buildings."

"I understand. You mean I am merely a historic name." He was silent a moment. "And yet I am a human being," he went on. "I blunder through life like other men. I crave sympathy as keenly as other people. I need wise counsel more than most need it. But somehow I am never allowed to forget the historic name. If I make friends, it distorts the friendship. If I seek advice, it is to the name they give it. Once I fretted at this; but I don't now. I accept it. I realize that it has to be."

"There must be compensations," said Ann.

"For utter loneliness? Ah, no! Nothing can quite make up for that. Of course you have seen 'L'Aiglon'?"

"Yes."

"Then you will appreciate my position. I am almost as lonely as that unhappy boy. You see, I too am regarded as a menace to the peace of Europe."

"You!" she exclaimed. "A menace?"

"You say 'a menace' as incredulously as I say it to myself. I can't see myself as a firebrand. I am not dreaming of battles like Napoleon's son. I would alter the map of Europe, yes; but I don't want to trouble Europe's peace. I want to make peace a certainty. You will comprehend that soon. I shall be frank with you; but first I must make it clear why I tell you these things. I must show you that you are already a factor in Old World politics. Men you have never seen have discussed your

features, your complexion, your charm, made guesses at your principles, tried to forecast your usefulness as a weapon against me."

She came to an astounded halt. "What madness are you telling me? How can you know these things?"

"Because they have happened to other women. Because I am a 'menace,' a man who must be spied upon, distracted from mischief, cajoled into idleness. I was slow to realize the truth. It came to me little by little. I had no suspicion that chance had nothing to do with the pleasant romances that fell to me. If I looked twice at a pretty face, it came my way a third time, as many times as I wished, and I merely thanked my luck. I grew fond of some of the pretty faces, I was so lonely, — and one of them — she was older than I — I think I loved. I trusted her. I told her things — not much, yet significant things — and she took them to her masters."

"Her masters! You mean —"

"I mean the men whose idea of Europe differs from mine. She was merely their spy. After that I was on my guard. I amused myself. I made fools of them all."

As she pieced together these extraordinary confidences, Ann suddenly confronted a possibility that flooded her with resentment and dismay.

"Have I been thrown in your way?" she demanded hotly.

"You? No, no! They have never chosen one of your countrywomen to pull their chestnuts from the fire. Ah, no; it was Destiny, no human will,

that brought us together. You were meant to be my ally, the ally for whom I have been waiting. But we have been watched. At Rheims they watched us. Either I am growing more clever or they more stupid. I see through their espionage as I couldn't once. I checkmated them there. They thought I would follow you to Paris and leave no stone unturned till we met; but I came instead to Brescia. I made them believe you had gone out of my mind as suddenly as you came into it. I pretended to have nothing in my head but aëroplanes. I was determined that before they could interfere I would see you, tell you the truth, ask your help. They will try to use you as they used the others. Tell me they shall not! Say you'll befriend a man who has never had a sincere friend!"

"My friendship would mean little to you," she said. The intensity of his appeal frightened her, and she cast about for a tactful means to end an incident that threatened to become too theatrical for her nerves.

"It would mean everything to me," he avowed, following close at her side as she turned. "It would enable me to do the work I was sent into the world to do."

"I can hardly believe that."

"But you will. Don't disappoint the hopes I have built upon you! Help me blind the eyes of my enemies!"

There was no putting him off. "Help you blind the eyes of your enemies?" she repeated. "How can I do that?"

"Let me pass before the world as your conquest."

The amazing petition gave the situation its crowning cap and bells of utter folly, and she laughed outright.

"But I am in earnest," he insisted gravely. "If I appear to think of nothing but you and aëroplanes, I shall be left unmolested in my work."

"And how, pray, shall I appear? As the successor of — the others?" She swept him an ironical bow. "Good night."

But he kept steadfastly by her side. "You are wrong to infer that," he answered quietly. "You will lose nothing in befriending me. You will figure as one more triumphant American girl with a Prince in chains. I assure you," he smiled a little, "I am not ineligible. The House of Austria — I say it with modesty — has even done me the honor to offer me marriage with a Duchess of the blood royal. Look at my suggestion dispassionately, if you can. It is something to be weighed by the intellect, not the heart. I am not in the least in love with you."

Had she faced him, events might have taken a different turn; but she apprehended the words only, and their cool audacity stung her pride. If merely to compel him to unsay them, she would strike the alliance!

"Suppose you give my intellect a chance," she retorted. "So far you have appealed to my sympathies and my vanity. But it would not specially amuse me to lead a Prince in chains, not even Prince Rodoslav. What real reason is there why I should join you in this make-believe?"

He listened like a soldier at attention. "What

reason? You will set a people free." His gesture was superb. "Does that make no appeal to an American? If I have spoken vaguely, I will make amends. You shall know my plans, share my counsels. Come! Sit with me here a moment." He indicated a secluded bench to which her unconsidered steps had brought them. "I will leave nothing in doubt."

"But I have not promised," she said.

"I don't ask your promise yet. I mean to prove how much I trust you. I shall tell you before you promise."

She listened to him there and, listening, gave her word. Only afterward did she realize that a low hanging ilex had drooped a giant limb over the wall behind them, and that she had sat where — test of her own sweet will — she had vowed she would not.

CHAPTER VIII

The morrow should have brought Justin Blair. Instead came a rumor. It was a rumor worthy of Italy. Superlative, luxuriant, mysterious, poetic, it did credit to a soil that sprouts legends as readily as artichokes. A series of paragraphs in the villainously printed Milanese daily which the lake dwellers read with their dubious coffee set it forth.

Brescia, fagged from her tournament, briefly chronicled a trial flight on the part of some aviator, name not given, who still lingered on the trampled outskirts of Montichiari. While aëronautics filled the press, it was a fact worthy of a line or two, no more. But it seemed that Cremona also had news to retail. Speculation had agitated the cafés of the Piazza Roma. Many persons with leisure for sky gazing had beheld a voyager of the air which, flying incredibly fast and inconceivably high, had borne down from the north and swept away toward the east. Not long afterward — all the accounts were obscure in point of time and detail — a soaring something, far too distant and too swift for accurate observation, came out of the west upon ducal Mantua, and, describing a vast semicircle as if taking its bearings, headed northeast. Then had come the turn of Verona, or at least the environs of Verona, where several olive pickers of proved intelligence

and veracity reported the transit of an aërial wanderer of vague outline but no uncertain speed, which had flashed out of nowhere and vanished toward the west. It looked like a great golden moth against the sun, they said. Last of all to bear witness was a village hugging the southern shore of Lake Garda. Toward evening an aëroplane — they knew aëroplanes when they saw them, these neighbors of progressive Brescia — had crossed the lake in a line with Lazise and Padenglie. It had flown at great altitude and tremendous speed, disappearing toward the foothills of the Brescian Alps. Struck by the dovetailing of these various accounts, the Milanese editor had grouped them under a single heading which, lacking time or invention, he entitled "Lombardy Mystified."

Virginia Truscott was also mystified. Neither at Brescia nor Rheims had she seen an aëroplane capable of such a feat. Brescia, Cremona, Mantua, Verona, Brescia again — she traced that imposing rhomboid on her motoring map of Lombardy and studied it with growing excitement.

"Look at this for a cross country flight, an afternoon spin!" she called to her husband. "What do you think of it?"

The stockbroker looked at the map as he was bidden and calmly resumed the mending of his favorite tackle, which had yesterday come to grief in an encounter with a ravenous pike.

"I think it's a fool lie," he said.

"I might have known you would," she shrugged; "but I don't think it's a lie. I think it's true. Why shouldn't it be true? If they fly at all, what's to

prevent their flying like that?" Drawing no response, she fell back on the more entertaining map. "If it is true," she added, "that's the machine for me!"

Her husband completed his repairs and evolved a sage reflection. "It's a silly job buying anybody's aëroplane yet, if you ask me."

"I don't," said his wife.

While the Truscotts exchanged these amenities in the famous suite overlooking the dear lake, Ann in a room not far removed was translating the same specimen of Italian journalism to her aunt.

"I knew Justin couldn't be mistaken," commented the elder woman tranquilly.

"But Oliver Page may have nothing to do with it," objected Ann, and, in unconscious plagiarism of the stockbroker, added, "and it may be a hoax."

"And your uncle may be hanging round Brescia simply for amusement! My dear, that man bought sleeping car stock when people thought Pullman crazy; he believed in the telephone when everybody else called it an impractical toy. You are old enough yourself to remember how he took up automobiles. And now it's aëroplanes."

Ann's thoughts went back to the hangars of Bethény. Had that toil stained figure, undaunted under crushing disappointment, come into his own? Was the laughingstock of Rheims to triumph over the idols of the Grande Semaine? She reviewed her attitude toward him and wished it had been more uniformly kind. She was always framing that wish about her attitude toward somebody. In moments of extreme penitence she even called herself a cat.

Certainly she had shown both claws and purr to Page. How childish of her to take offense because a preoccupied worried man had passed hasty judgment upon Rodoslav! How could any one who had not shared the Prince's confidence know him for what he was? They were more alike than they dreamed, those two. Absorbed with an inner vision, each presented to the world an outer man whom the wisest might misjudge.

"We'll be seeing your uncle now," predicted Mrs. Blair; "but whether he'll have anything to say nobody knows but himself."

"I hope he'll at least tell us how long we're booked for Cadenabbia," said Ann. "Does he think we'll stay contented with scenery and afternoon tea while he goes in for aëroplanes? I presume he's flying all over Italy right now."

"Heaven forbid!" ejaculated her aunt. "Surely Justin won't be foolish enough to go up in the thing!"

"He'll be foolish if he doesn't. What's the use of backing such a business if you don't get the fun out of it? I intend to fly the very first chance I get. I made up my mind to that at Rheims. If he has a proper sense of gratitude toward uncle, Oliver Page will take me up. If he hasn't — well, I'll find somebody else. Prince Rodoslav has bought an aëroplane. Perhaps he'll ask me."

"You have seen the last of him," smiled the elder woman, treating the discussion as a piece of girlish nonsense. "You all but flung the heel of your slipper in his face."

Ann deemed the time opportune to discount the

astonishment that the future held in store for her family.

"I'm sure he didn't mind," she answered. "In fact, I'm so sure that I believe he means to call on us to-day."

Mrs. Blair humored the absurdity a moment longer. "Then he'll find us out," she said. "I've ordered a carriage for the afternoon."

"So much the better. We wouldn't see him the first time, anyhow. Where are we driving?"

"To Menaggio and then up the Porlezza road. I first saw Como from there more years ago than I want to count."

They reached the desired turn of the oft bending road at an hour when the view, which every tourist knows and a legion of artists have sketched, was at its loveliest. Bellagio, Varenna, the white villages of the foothills, vineyards, forests, rugged crags, lake, mountains, sky, all melted into one another in haze of ineffable delicacy suffused with golden light from the lower west. Then, as the sun dipped below the hills, the scene took on its supreme, prismatic witchery.

"Pearl, opal, emerald, turquoise, sapphire — how many more?" said Ann, breaking the silence. "You must rob a jewel casket to match those colors."

"Or a garden," said her aunt. "Lilac, lavendar, wistaria, violet — yes, and rose," she added, as a sudden pink flushed the higher summits to east and north.

As they turned away at last and signaled their driver they became spectators of a fantastic accident. Round the curve of the road descended an ancient

carrozza of such frail appearance, drawn by such a mummy of a horse and piloted by such a ragamuffin of a youth, that the wonder was the trio had ever gained this lofty eminence in one another's company. Outraged probability now took its revenge. A too sharp negotiation of the bend gave the crazy alliance its deathblow. A rear wheel abruptly collapsed and showered its spokes into the highway, whereupon the sagging vehicle threw such an unreasonable burden upon the shafts as stripped the parody of a harness from the burlesque of a horse, and then, with an undulation that was almost a curtsy, reduced its remaining wheels to ruin and nestled quietly in the dust. The animal, being of mature age, betrayed no excitement and stood motionless in its place. The driver, finding himself still in possession of his seat and cigarette, held to both with philosophic calm and emitted a leisured cloud of smoke. Indeed, the one jarring note in a scene otherwise expressive of perfect resignation to the blow of Fate was an eruption of violent and obviously profane Italian from the unseen passenger.

The onlookers burst into peals of laughter.

"But some one may be hurt!" said Mrs. Blair, checking herself.

"Some one is at least conscious," answered Ann.

Their laughter had only stimulated the outflow; but the sound of their voices dammed the flood at once and a head craned round the driver's seat to reconnoiter. Beneath a panama hat were disclosed a pair of piercing black eyes overhung by tufted eyebrows, an aquiline beak of a nose, and a mustache with the spread and poise of a white bird.

Then a hand, with a gallant gesture, swept away the panama and a bald head was added to the now complete portrait of a celebrated man.

"Baron Saccarello!" exclaimed the audience in chorus.

With unimpaired dignity the great man stepped from the wreck and bowed over their hands. "It was the Germans," he explained with recovered good humor. "I telegraphed to Menaggio for a carriage, and this is what I received. They could send no other. An invasion of personally conducted Berliners had snapped up everything. It's the old story. From the days of the Cæsars the Teuton hordes have poured over the passes into poor Italy."

Mrs. Blair tendered a seat in her own carriage, which he promptly accepted. The philosophic driver issued from his calm, displayed an aptitude for finance, was pacified, and shifted the luggage.

"If you will drop me near the pier in Menaggio," said Saccarello as they drove on, "I shall find some way of getting on to Cadenabbia."

"But we also go to Cadenabbia," she explained. "We will set you down wherever you like. We're at the Bella Vista ourselves."

The Italian hailed her words with childlike pleasure. "The gods are trying to make amends," he declared. "The Bella Vista is my own destination. I have often taken my *villeggiatura* under its roof."

"Is this your *villeggiatura* time?" asked Ann, a fragment of the Saccarello legend coming to mind.

"Ah, yes, Signorina," he responded, his glance ranging her costume approvingly. "It is all holiday with me now. I am past my usefulness, a mere

idler. Whenever I can, I enter Italy by this gateway," he went on with a wave of the hand toward the lake. "If I live long enough I mean to imitate Pliny and build a villa here. But I believe the excellent Pliny family had several villas among them. One stood over there on the Punta de Bellagio, another down toward Lenno, where the rascally boatmen try to make you think you see its ruins under water. The others — who knows? One villa must content me, however. Land values have gone up along the Larian Lake since their day."

Till their passage through the mild bustle of Menaggio checked him, he told them stories of Italy, prolonging the word tenderly whenever it fell from his lips, as if it were the name of a woman he loved. Then, as they swung into the Cadenabbia road, he began to rally Ann upon her silence.

"Did you leave your vivacity in Paris, Signorina?" he demanded. "Have you no more to say to me of all the topics we discussed between the acts of 'Rigoletto'? But perhaps new interests have supplanted flying machines and the other things I am so ungallant as to have forgotten?"

"No," said Ann comprehensively.

"Cadenabbia is dull, then? I should have supposed it a little Mayfair or Newport at this season."

"So it is," she agreed. "You will create a sensation among us. The Italians are supposed to be an extinct race."

The parchment round Saccarello's eyes wrinkled appreciatively; but his real attention was fixed not upon her words, but upon a sudden change in her pupils, a minute shortening of her respiration, a faint

pink glow which passed like a breath across her cheek as she perceived some unexpected object ahead. In another instant they met, greeted, and passed Rodoslav, whose face mirrored blank astonishment as he recognized their venerable companion.

Saccarello half rose and waved a friendly salutation to the rear. "So we have a friend in common?" he said, resuming his seat.

Mrs. Blair never sailed under false colors. "Hardly a friend," she answered. "We have met the Prince but once. His recognition was merely a bit of perfunctory courtesy."

Saccarello smilingly dissented. "I know that young man's perfunctory courtesies," he returned, "and that was not one of them. If you are not yet friends, you will become so."

"It seems scarcely probable," she said simply.

The Italian turned his smiling regard upon Ann. "And you, Signorina — what is your opinion of the princely greeting?"

"Mine?" she laughed, acutely conscious of the part she had undertaken to play. "I can't decide; but I hope it was friendly. It must be amusing to know such men as he. Don't you find it so?"

Saccarello's mirthful expression faded. "Not always," he said.

As they entered the hotel a servant brought calling cards to Mrs. Blair, which she without verbal comment passed to her niece. Ann changed color as she read. The garden interview had been no midsummer night's dream! He had meant what he said! Here was his first move in the game to

blind the eyes of Europe. Then, with a flash of inspiration, she took up her rôle. As Saccarello, having made his acknowedgments to her aunt, turned to her, she extended Rodoslav's card.

"I think I am rather afraid of you," she said. "Do all your prophecies come true?"

CHAPTER IX

Mrs. Truscott also had received a princely call, and was beside herself with the glory of it. "I was out when he came," she told Ann, waylaying her in a corridor; "but I met him going away and insisted on his having tea. You should have seen the faces of that snobbish English family who always monopolize the best table! They were green, my dear, positively green! They all knew who he was, of course; but so there shouldn't be any doubt I once or twice addressed him by his title. What do you suppose he talked about? What do you suppose?"

"Your frock?" hazarded Ann.

Virginia fluttered a complacent hand over the zebra striped costume. "He did say it was striking," she assented; "but that wasn't the leading motive of his rhapsody. It certainly was a rhapsody, and all about you!"

"About me!" She did her best to appear amazed.

"Yes, you. And after the way you treated him yesterday afternoon! I simply can't understand it."

"Perhaps it was his princely idea of small talk."

"Not a bit of it. He hasn't another idea in his handsome head."

She plunged into details which Ann scarcely heard. Seeming to attend, she in reality battled

with misgiving at the abandon with which Rodoslav flung himself into the game. Decidedly he was in earnest. He had followed his first move with a second even more downright in its publicity. Recognizing Mrs. Truscott's value as an advertising medium, he had deliberately fed her gossip to peddle. What she knew, Cadenabbia would know also, and what Cadenabbia, in the height of its Anglo-Saxon season, talked about, presently attained the dignity of Continental news.

"Oh, yes, you'll see him back here promptly," declared Mrs. Truscott, giving emphasis by repetition to a prophecy Ann had missed. "But he is not stopping next door, as we thought. He just happened to be strolling round the gardens of the villa when we met him. He knows the owner, of course, and wanders all over the place whenever he likes; but he's really staying at a rather plain little hotel in the town. Odd, isn't it? Perhaps he is one of those queer modern hybrids who are half aristocrat and half socialist. For my part, I prefer to see people one thing or another — something I can comfortably classify. Then I know where I am and can talk scandal, or brotherhood of man, as the case may be. But I dare say you won't mind what he talks. Actions do speak louder than words, don't they? I'm delighted at the turn of affairs, my dear. I never expected to play Cupid to a semi-royal match!" And then, in final arch injunction, "Don't forget your untitled friends when you become a princess."

Ann could not resist the opening. "You shall be court jester," she promised, and went her way.

In her heart she reflected that she might yet need a fool in motley. She had listened to serious things last night. She had engaged to play a difficult part. What would her Aunt Helen think? What would be the point of view of that stanch republican, Justin Blair?

She had a partial answer to the latter query as she crossed the threshold of her room. Through the half open door of the adjoining salon she heard her uncle's voice in jocose comment upon the situation which, amid her greetings, Mrs. Blair had somehow found time to sketch.

"Yes, I'll return his call," he was saying. "Since he's left his card for me, I'll play mine back again, strictly according to Hoyle. But just let him mention settlements! Then he'll wake up to the fact that he is dealing with a business man."

Ann pushed open the door and entered. "Please don't crush him till he does mention settlements," she petitioned. "You'll spoil my fun."

Justin laughed and kissed her. "I agree to that," he said. "I guess your head is screwed on straight."

Ann changed the subject. "And now," she catechized, "what about Brescia? Is Oliver Page a genius after all?"

Her uncle's face became impassive. "What do you mean by genius?"

"You know what I mean. Has he finally succeeded? Did he actually make that wonderful flight?"

"Which?"

"The one the Milan paper described this morning. Somebody went up at Brescia, was seen not long

He stabbed the paragraph with his pipestem.

after at Cremona, then at Mantua, and finally at Verona, all in one afternoon."

Justin smiled. "Sounds almost like a home paper, doesn't it? No, I didn't read that tale; but I heard about it."

"And wasn't it true?" demanded his wife. "Hasn't Oliver Page flown after all?"

"Oh, yes. Oliver has tinkered his motor into shape at last. His machine really begins to look practical. But how about dinner? Must I dress?"

His helpmate abandoned the pumping process; but Ann made one more attempt.

"I believe there is something behind that newspaper story," she said, "and I'm sure you know what it is. Don't be a sphinx."

Justin drew a newspaper from his pocket. "Nobody can be a sphinx over something everybody knows," he replied. "In its afternoon edition the Milan daily clears up its own mystery. I quarried out the sense of it with the help of a pocket dictionary. Suppose you give your aunt the polished version while I worry into a stiff shirt." He stabbed the illuminating paragraph with his pipestem and took himself off to his dressing room.

Ann found the item as concise as most afternoon explanations of a morning mystery. Rosy theory gave place to gray fact. It was true that there had been an ascent at Brescia. An aviator, said to be an American, had given a new motor a trial. He had, as stated in the previous dispatch, succeeded in getting as far as Lake Garda. But as for Cremona and Mantua, inquiry had developed the fact that bird shaped kites, which inexperienced people every-

where mistook for aëroplanes these days, were flown in both cities yesterday. This rational explanation of the credulous visions of Cremona and Mantua naturally precluded any further consideration of the absurd story from the suburbs of Verona, which, emanating from ignorant peasants, bore the stamp of unreality on its very face. Forced to descend in his homeward flight, the Brescian aviator had not returned to his shed until an hour too late to admit of an interview.

Ann read with growing doubt and flung down the paper in absolute disbelief. "Those people did see something extraordinary!" she declared. "I know it! I'm convinced that Oliver Page did make that flight and that Uncle Justin not only knows he made it, but is behind this newspaper denial. What does it mean?"

"Dollars," suggested Mrs. Blair sententiously.

There was nothing more to be had from the head of the family. Neither Brescia nor aëroplanes crossed his lips, nor, for that matter, anything else save his dinner. His fellow guests passed before his scrutiny without remark and apparently without speculation until, in leaving, they approached a table where, quite alone, his bird of prey expression salient, Saccarello sat consuming an ice. He perceived them and bowed.

"Where did you meet that man?" Justin put the question as soon as they were out of earshot.

His wife mentioned "Rigoletto," and detailed the odd encounter of the afternoon.

"Do you know who he is?" asked Ann.

He nodded abstractedly. "If you have an oppor-

tunity that doesn't seem forced, present me," he said. Then, after a moment's rumination, "I understand he's one of the crack poker players of Europe," he added casually. "I may be able to sit in at a game."

The chance presently befell. As the old man limped into the lobby, he cast a leisured glance round and observing the Americans, joined their group with a smiling allusion to his mishap. Justin followed up the introduction with an invitation to coffee, and the Italian sat down with them.

"I had a glimpse of you the last time you visited Washington," said Justin.

Saccarello displayed one of the feats of memory that had often won him the blind devotion of lesser men.

"And I had a glimpse of you," he returned unexpectedly. "In fact, I heard you speak in the Senate. They were discussing immigration, and you rose to defend the character of the Italian laborer from an unjust attack."

"I had no notion you were there."

"I was delighted at what you said," alleged Saccarello. "I repeated the substance of it to the King on my return."

Justin's square hewn face beamed. "I'm not a public speaker," he said; "but I couldn't keep out of that debate. First and last, I've employed a good many Italians, and I like them."

Their talk drifted from topic to topic, and presently the women left them. Two hours later Ann saw them together in an alcove. They were not playing poker.

On the morrow Justin briefly announced his intention of leaving for Milan.

"I may get as far as Rome," he said.

"Business?" asked his wife.

"Business," he assented. "I've struck an Italian proposition which interests me. I dare say Ann can amuse herself here a few days longer," he added, with a quizzical glance at his niece. "I'll leave my card on the new adorer before I go, so that everything may be in form."

Ann answered him in his own humor. "Mind your promise!" she warned. "No thunders till he mentions the dot!"

"That's understood."

The same afternoon she met Saccarello equipped for travel.

"Going?" she said. "You are soon done with your beloved Como."

"Yes, I'm off. It's well I haven't that villa, isn't it? But Pliny had no telegraph to ruin his holidays. *Addio, Signorina.* It's nearly boat time, I think."

"If you are taking the boat south, you will have my uncle for company."

"So! Fortune follows me. You ladies convoy me into Cadenabbia, the head of the house softens the pang of my departure."

Justin, followed by his luggage, came suddenly upon them. "I'm ready!" he called.

He looked at Saccarello as he spoke, and most certainly addressed him; but with an adroit maneuver the old man consigned the remark to Ann.

"Miss Milburn tells me we are to be fellow trav-

elers," he said suavely. "We Italians abhor a solitary journey."

The American met his eye. "Yes," he returned dryly, "I find I have to go to Milan." As Saccarello moved on he stared after him thoughtfully; but, on realizing that Ann was in turn watching him, he became abruptly frivolous and pinched her ear. "I looked after that bit of social red tape," he told her.

"No thunders?" she smiled.

"Not even heat lightning."

"Did you see him?"

"Yes."

"You did!"

"I ran into him after I left my card. Good-by."

Ann anchored him by a lapel. "Would you run off without telling me what he talked about?" she reproached.

Justin grinned and detached himself. "Aëroplanes," he vouchsafed. "Not a girl was mentioned."

She saw the two men take their departure from the hotel in separate vehicles; but she was none the less sure that they left by prearrangement and that their journey had a common object. Of what had they talked last night? Was her uncle still busy with the affairs of Oliver Page? What was it the aviator had really accomplished? The situation bristled with riddles to which Justin Blair alone held the master key.

Whereupon Rodoslav once more imposed himself upon her attention. Turning in at the Bella Vista as the travelers drove away, he saluted each of

them ceremoniously, and then, followed by a long backward look from the Italian, pressed on with eager step to meet her. His bearing as he bent over her hand was nothing if not loverlike; but the eyes he lifted to hers were full of triumphant amusement.

"Half a minute later and the tableau would have been spoiled," he said. "The chief spectator would have been gone."

"Do you mean my uncle?"

"I mean Saccarello. How long have you known that old man? How came he to be driving into Cadenabbia with you yesterday?"

She explained in a sentence. "Is it good news or bad?" she asked; for his expression was thoughtful.

"On the whole, good." Then, with the mocking laughter leaping back into his eyes, he said: "I couldn't stay away any longer. I've come to ask you and your aunt — and shall we include Mrs. Truscott? — to take tea with me."

Her own smile was as ironic as his own. "Do you wish a private or a public performance?" she queried.

"Public, by all means. Suppose we say at the Latteria della Cappelletta? We shall be sure of a crowded audience there at five o'clock."

CHAPTER X

THE public performance of "A Prince in Chains" at the primitive little dairy where fashion for the moment chose to drink its tea was a prelude to a run of the same comedy with all Como for audience and background. Rodoslav sent his Swiss valet with flowers every morning; he danced attendance every night Ann was to be found at home; while the hours between saw him a man dominated by the one idea of amusing an American girl who — in the opinion of Anglo-Saxon Cadenabbia — seemed to have no appreciation of his exalted rank or of her own undeserved good fortune. He organized excursions to Lecco and the country back of Bellagio; he golfed, rowed, walked, idled as her caprice dictated; he even planned a night ascent of Monte Crocione, which Mrs. Blair, whom neither mountain climbing nor small hour prowlings attracted, vetoed with decision.

Virginia Truscott would have gone. She would have chaperoned anything Rodoslav proposed. Her admiration for him bordered on monomania. This he turned to profit, redoubling his attentions to Ann, whenever she was by. As a matter of course he included her and her husband in an expedition by launch to the castle crowned rock of Corenno, which he offered as a substitute for the sunrise

breakfast on the mountain. The day became one of Virginia's most cherished recollections.

It was such a day, indeed, as might leave a lasting fragrance in any memory. Time seemed to linger to savor the perfect moment of a perfect autumn, the luscious ripeness that to-morrow would call decay. The air was its softest, the lake its bluest; the vineyards, the forests, the mountains, wore their most elusive veil of haze. Bellagio, spotless in the morning sun, the Fiume di Latte spouting truly milk white to-day; the brown old tower keeping watch upon Varenna; Bellano holding the gateway of its purple valley, — all the panorama of the eastern shore shared in the atmospheric witchery which reached its supreme expression round the battlemented ruin they had made their place of pilgrimage.

They lunched outdoors, Rodoslav's servant spreading the cloth in an olive grove, and idled away the warm siesta hours amid the crumbling walls of the ruin. The Prince, who sketched, amused himself with the gnarled trunks of the olive trees. Truscott, deprived of cocktails and the joy of casting a line, reverted to his third passion and proposed a game of bridge.

His wife voiced the common horror. "Bridge!" she cried. "In the castle of Corenno! You deserve to be thrown off the rock!"

"I can't see why," said the stockbroker with sincerity, and, selecting a flat stone, devoted himself to Idiot's Delight.

"For my part," declared Virginia, "I mean to dream of the storied past."

The storied past did not bar a lively interest in

the present, however. Mrs. Blair, who had no civil loophole of escape, became the recipient of a stream of gossip as inexhaustible as the widow's cruse. Ann, more fortunately placed, contrived to steal away and fortify herself against boredom in a dilapidated tower with a faultless view.

But she was not to be solitary. She had scarcely possessed herself of her lordly prospect when she heard Rodoslav's step.

"You are very pictorial," he said. "I wish I could really draw."

She turned her head just far enough to meet his eyes. "Aren't you wasting energy?" she queried.

He came and stood over her. "Just what does that mean, my ally?"

"Isn't it perfectly clear? We have no audience. Why not rest?"

"I had some such idea when I followed you off the stage," he smiled. "They say actors often read or sew or chat while they wait. Why not tell your leading lady that she is pictorial?"

"Our ideas of rest differ," returned Ann dryly. "Suppose we leave all that for the footlights."

"You are very businesslike."

"Is that a fault?"

"Not in my eyes. I like it in you; but I should like it too if we could be friends. I haven't had many friends, — I told you that the other night, — and if sometimes you would permit me glimpses of your real self, let me know the woman you hide from me, talk to me of things — ah, but such camaraderie is a plant of slow growth, isn't it?" he broke off lightly. "May I show you my sketch?"

She experienced a sensation of something at once powerful and disagreeable as she glanced at his drawing. He had humanized the old trees weirdly. They seemed souls in torment, creatures of a medieval nightmare, a Dantesque vision. More forcibly than anything he had done or said, they revealed how little she knew about this man. A racial gulf, a chasm of centuries, yawned between her mind and the mind that had evolved these symbols.

"How can you imagine such things?" she exclaimed.

"Because I am a Servian. You know, even vampires are still real among my people."

"How horrible!" She put the sketch from her with a shudder.

"But they have beautiful superstitions too," he said. "Each, they believe, has his guardian angel. Each has his star, which at death dies with him. And some men — the lucky men — are beloved by *vile*. Forgive us the witches and the vampires for the sake of the *vile*. The naiads and hamadryads who used to haunt Italy were poor things beside them."

"And what were they?"

"Don't say 'were,'" he protested. "They are too lovely to banish. They are born from the dew. They live near springs, springs in high places, such as this. They are as pure as their birth, and as beautiful. They harm no one, and when they love a man good fortune attends him. All my boyhood I prayed for their love. I made them libations and offerings, and when I came into my inheritance I even built them a little temple, a shrine."

"A shrine!" she repeated.

"No one else knew it was meant for them," he explained. "I have a place built upon a rock like this, with the Adriatic before and the mountains behind, and out of the rock wells a stream which the peasants say the *vile* used to haunt. I have lain hidden for hours, hoping to surprise them. And then, as I just told you, I built them a temple. The workmen thought it was a belvedere; but I had faith that the dew maidens would understand."

"I'm sure they did," Ann smiled, touched by the story.

Rodoslav swept the scene with a gesture. "In many ways my place is like this," he said. "You will tell me so when you visit it."

"When I visit it!" she repeated. "Is that probable?"

"It is certain."

His seriousness amazed her. "How can you say so?" she demanded. "I have promised nothing that —"

"I see you there," he cut her short. "I see you beside that spring. Promises! What have human promises to do with Fate?"

Ann laid hold on her common sense. "You may understand your people," she said; "but you have a very hazy notion of me. I haven't been brought up on mystery. I haven't the slightest belief in Fate or the faintest wish to see your house on the Adriatic. I have given my word to help you keep your great work a secret; but pray don't imagine that I shall follow you to the Balkans or anywhere else. If you happen to be where I am, I shall go on

with this make-believe; but I will do no more than that. I live with my uncle and aunt; their plans must be mine."

"And mine. We are in perfect accord." He answered her with such courteous good humor that she softened at once.

"Perhaps your star will tell you what my uncle will do next," she suggested laughingly. "He left the other day for Milan. Later he wired us that he had gone on to Rome. Now — who knows where he is or may ask us to follow? You have chosen a will o' the wisp for your ally."

"I have no quarrel with my ally," he replied, and they joined the others.

In the close confines of the launch, whence no auditor could escape, Mrs. Truscott demonstrated that her conversational powers were still vigorous. "Sweet spot!" she apostrophized the scene as they embarked. "And to think that Baedeker dismisses you with a line! I know it's so; for I looked this morning. 'Corenno — with a ruined castle' — that's all. Baedeker is as unemotional as a — as a list of stock quotations."

"Stock quotations unemotional!" echoed her husband, breaking into the talk like a jack-in-the-box. "Suffering cats!"

This callous demolition of her simile disconcerted Virginia. "What was it I wanted to say?" she queried, frowning. "Oh, yes; it's that I've quite decided to go to Pau for the holidays. Is that a long jump, Mrs. Blair?" she demanded, as the elder woman's eyes denoted mental strain. "It came about simply enough. Looking at the Alps made

me think of the Pyrenees, and the Pyrenees as a matter of course suggested Pau." She turned on Rodoslav. "Where will you go for aviation lessons?" she said.

He came out of a reverie. "I haven't decided," he answered. "Is that what takes you to Pau?"

"Yes. I'm told that Pau will be distinctly an aviation center this winter. I'm delighted. It will be so nice to be able to learn in a place that is not poked off from human society. I adore Pau. The races there are perfect and, barring St. Andrew's, I can't think of any place where I ever had a better game of golf. For that matter, I've never enjoyed a livelier run with the hounds than I had once at a Croix d'Arrien meet. But I shan't be able to go in for golf or fox hunting this year. I must devote every minute to my fascinating 'plane."

"Have you really bought an aëroplane?" asked Ann.

"Not precisely. I had almost settled on a French monoplane; but the account of that cross country flight from Brescia made me hesitate. Nobody seems to know just what did happen. I asked your uncle's opinion; but he told me I was barking up the wrong tree. Isn't he droll?"

"Will you fly too?" Mrs. Blair asked the broker, who was trailing an imaginary line astern.

"Not unless I'm lugged along by force," he said feelingly.

"I dare say I shall be the only woman in Pau who 'planes," pursued Virginia with an unconvincing shudder. "That won't be pleasant; for the newspapers will give me no peace. My costume will be

kodaked at every turn. But the pioneers, in no matter what, have to face annoyances." She turned on Rodoslav again. "You'll be a pioneer too, won't you? I think you're the first prince to take up aëroplaning."

"Am I?" he smiled.

"I'm sure of it. Of course many others are interested. Wilbur Wright had a whole procession of royalty come to see him fly. But I suppose the crowned heads all see it through the eyes of their war departments, just another machine for scouting or dropping bombs. You, of course —" She found herself checked by the unhappy thought that the fact that he was not a reigning prince might be a sore point with Rodoslav.

He smilingly helped her out of her bog. "I, having no war department to bother me," he completed, "can go into it merely as a sport."

Ann, knowing what she knew, suddenly divined in his careless words a significance as bold as it was picturesque. Thrown with him for a moment after they landed at the hotel, she resolved to test her prescience.

"I have had a revelation," she told him.

"Yes, my ally?"

"You have not bought an aëroplane for mere sport—a part of the make-believe to blind Europe."

"No."

"You mean to use it over there beyond the Adriatic, where they still have imaginations. When you go back among your people, you will appear riding the air."

He regarded her fixedly for a long moment. "Go on with your revelation," he said.

"It ends there," she laughed. "I leave you in the air."

"Alone?"

"I suppose so. I have given you all my vision."

"Then I will complete it. There is some one who rides with me."

Ann foresaw sentiment and dodged. "Your mechanician, very likely," she suggested, "or an aid-de-camp."

"It is a woman I see."

"Probably one of the dew maidens, then."

"Yes," he agreed, "I think she is. I believe that my temple was not built in vain."

Despite the fanciful utterances that ever and again reminded her that he was unlike other men, Ann's faith in his fundamental practicality remained unshaken. In general she saw what the world saw, a man of everyday interests and rather more than everyday simplicity. Only once did Cadenabbia have occasion to suspect the existence of a dreamer in Rodoslav, and this was on a day consecrated to dreams.

Ann had not looked to play other than a spectator's part in the Corso dei Fiori; but as the fête drew near it transpired that real hostility underlay Virginia Truscott's preparations for the battle of the flowers, and she became, almost in spite of herself, an amused partisan. A social feud spurred Virginia's energy. A British matron, self appointed leader of a clique which its members considered smart and its critics snobbish, was at any cost to be outdone.

"It's not her snubs I mind," discriminated Virginia. "It's the silly talk about her artistic

taste. Artistic! She doesn't know the meaning of the word. I intend to have a float that will make hers look as cheap as a market queen's at Micarême."

With Ann pledged, she had hope of enlisting Rodoslav; but she lacked courage to ask him herself, and Ann would not undertake to intercede. She likewise failed to secure her husband, who not only declined to wear a fancy costume for anybody, but stated his intention of cutting the whole fool show. He did not go to the churlish extreme of withdrawing his financial aid, however, and, as always, his wife had lavish funds to gratify her whims. She had also another advantage over her rival. Though it was uncertain whether he would be present at all, Rodoslav threw himself into her plans with such zest that the final outcome was as much his as Mrs. Truscott's.

"I do hope you'll be in Cadenabbia after the pains you've taken!" she said to him the evening before the fête.

"I shall try to arrive before the battle ends," he replied.

The morrow dawned wet, and even at noon, with the corso almost at hand, it was pouring as if Nature bore the affair a grudge. Then, with the air of a gigantic piece of scene shifting, the leaden dome parted in halves, rolled swiftly away, and let in a flood of summer sun upon everything. Cadenabbia instantly sparkled into life and color. Flags shook out their wet folds, the streets grew populous, little craft darted out from Menaggio, Varenna, Bellagio, and all lower Como and converged upon the water

front. When the music heralding the pageant began, lake, sky, and air were all faultless.

From the catamaran to the canoe, every species of small boat that plied the lake had been impressed into the flower laden chain which now drew its brilliant length along the cheering shore. One craft was a mass of oleanders; a second bore late blooming roses; a third was a miniature island of scarlet dahlias, with for its central figure a girl of striking brunette loveliness, costumed to match her domain. Every period of Italian history had been drawn upon by the lake dwellers for inspiration. Etruscan was followed by Roman, Roman gave place to Goth. A garland wreathed galley of Pliny's time was succeeded by a float arranged like a formal garden of the Renaissance, with dwarf palms and cypresses, tiny fountain and sundial, and midget statues closing its box bordered paths.

At the very end came the rivals; but, instead of clashing, the British matron and Mrs. Truscott by a happy chance completed each other's picture. The American, thanks to Rodoslav's ingenuity and her husband's purse, had equipped and gorgeously peopled a state gondola of the period of Venice's supreme magnificence. The Englishwoman had elected to symbolize autumnal Italy, with a not too scandalous Bacchus attended by equally decorous, yet not unpicturesque, nymphs, in a setting of vines heavy with purple grapes. Each float, without discord, swelled the other's hymn to the joy of life, each woman was blissfully content. The one saw the brilliant Venetians as her heralds, the other deemed Bacchus her appropriate pendant.

Doubling upon itself before the long reach of the Bella Vista, the pageant grouped for the battle of the flowers.

And now it was, with the fête at its climax, that Rodoslav made his spectacular return. No one saw his approach. The pretty scene had drawn every eye. Unobserved till he was part of the picture, he shot past in an autoboat, releasing at a stroke a great flock of pigeons with many hued ribbons streaming from their tails. The crowded shore volleyed applause. The Corso dei Fiori had received its final touch of picturesqueness.

But this was not the whole of Rodoslav's contribution. He himself was already far away; but his curling wake remained to keep his memory green. To the startled occupants of the lighter craft it loomed like a tidal wave. All save the stoutest were tossed violently about, and the more fragile shipped water. The state gondola was rammed by the galley and sheered off, listing dangerously, its seams spurting. Those ashore were slow to realize that the huddled figures were in real peril. They laughed at the confusion among the floats. Then one man plunged suddenly from the crowd, seized upon a loitering rowboat, and, himself aiding with the oars, pulled at top speed for the crippled gondola.

Only when she found herself in the dry boat did Ann realize that she owed her escape from a wetting, if not from more serious mishap, to Oliver Page.

"I don't know who the bird specialist was," he said grimly; "but he belongs in a padded cell. I never saw a worse case of egomania. He thought of nobody but himself."

CHAPTER XI

Ann had to agree that there was ground for the criticism but, as at Rheims, she was annoyed by his fashion of putting it. Had it lain within her power to conceal Rodoslav's identity, she would have done it. She felt that Page was temperamentally incapable of doing him justice. But there was no shielding him. Virginia let his name escape in the midst of her voluble gratitude.

"But the poor dear meant well," she ended. "And there's no denying that it was picturesque. I suppose he forgot we hadn't real gondolas and galleys."

Page glanced at Ann; but added nothing to his first comment, and her own thanks were the warmer for his silence.

"Old Point — Como — where next will you rescue me?" she added.

He smiled back at her in his grave way, but made no other response. Despite his bluntness, he was a shy man. In truth, he was more than often brusk because he was shy. Moreover, Ann's costume was a barrier. He could not wholly dissociate her from the sumptuous past she portrayed.

On her part, she also found him changed. The worried inventor of the Bethény hangars had vanished. This was a man who had achieved. So strong was her perception of this new aura of success

that it prompted her first words, as, once ashore, he piloted her to the spot where he had so abruptly left the Blairs.

"I know I can congratulate you at last," she said. "Uncle Justin threw cold water on the newspaper stories; but he did admit that you had flown."

"Yes," he assented, with a brevity as laconic as Justin's, "I've managed to get off the ground."

"I am very glad. How restful you will find it here after all your hard work!"

"I am here merely for a day or two," he replied.

"That's a short time to give Como; but perhaps you've seen it before?"

"No," he said simply, "I have never traveled."

She could not determine from his tone whether he deplored or was indifferent to this deprivation. He merely stated a bald fact. "But you traveled to get here," she reminded.

"I'm afraid I saw nothing. I had my work to think about."

"I see," she responded, dismayed at the mental poverty of a man who could cross France and Italy unmoved.

It was a relief to join the family and be rid of the burden of his entertainment; but Justin saw no flaw in his protégée.

"He is the son of his father," he declared, as he and Ann made a little promenade of the garden before dinner. "Both of them plain spoken, straight as a die, Trojans for work."

"Had Fighting Joe any imagination?" asked Ann.

"He had the gift of guessing the enemy's plans. I think it's safe to call that imagination. But that's a woman's question. What put it in your head?"

"The son. I find it rather hard to talk to him."

He eyed her shrewdly. "You found plenty to say to him at Old Point. What did you talk about then?"

"I can't conceive. But perhaps he has changed."

"No," he said; "it's you that's changed. You've been bitten with Europitis. You've joined the silly army of women who say the American man has no conversation."

"That would be treason to you," she protested, laughing. "When you are in the mood, I'd rather listen to you than any man I've met on either side of the water."

Justin was mollified and pinched her cheek. "You must get Page in his mood," he went on. "What does your princely friend talk about?"

Ann affected to consider. "Well, for one thing, aëroplanes."

"What can he know about them? You bring that topic up with Oliver if you want solid information."

"I did. I gave him a chance to tell me about that Brescia mystery."

"Yes?"

"He said he'd managed to get off the ground. Not another thing!"

Her uncle gave a dry chuckle. "Good boy!" he commented. He walked on in silence for a moment. "Just between ourselves, Ann," he added, "Page did smash a few records the other afternoon."

She faced him excitedly. "Then those people in Cremona and Mantua and Verona did see something!"

"Don't tell the neighbors," he warned, returning to his usual cautious self. "And don't jump at conclusions. Oliver has a machine that will go; but he's not looking for publicity. Aviation prizes don't interest him any more. He doesn't need them. He has produced a business proposition, and I am going to help him reap his profits in a businesslike way. I drop you this hint because I don't want you to measure a man of his caliber by drawing-room standards. He may not have the particular kind of imagination you prefer; but he has brains."

"Why does it matter how I measure him?"

"It matters because you may see a lot of him in the next few months."

"Oh!" said Ann without enthusiasm.

"And because I want him treated as one of the family."

Ann suspected him of a lumbering attempt at matchmaking and smiled inscrutably. "As one of the family!" she repeated. "Do you mean in every way?"

Justin saw the smile and, not understanding it, frowned. "Of course," he said. "What are you driving at?"

"I wanted to be sure. If he is to be one of the family, I shall feel free to tell him his faults."

"You're a minx," he retorted. "Let's hope he'll catalogue a few of yours."

Page proved his own best advocate. As she

watched him at dinner, Ann reflected that, whatever he lacked, he was in any case a handsome, wholesome, modest figure of a man, whom one might trust to do the honorable thing in all circumstances and very likely the saving thing in an emergency. This colored her manner and, as if he felt the change, the American lost the shy formality that had paralyzed her friendliness and, before she slept, made her the confidante of a fragment of intimate autobiography.

Oddly enough, he chose for the scene of these confidences the precise spot where she had listened to Rodoslav. A rounder moon flooded garden and lake; the air, though caressing still, had a touch of autumn; but otherwise there was no change. The scent of rose and oleander, the plash of the fountain beyond the wall of the villa, the facile music from the orchestra indoors, were all the same.

It was the threadbare music that led to it. "I've heard that before I think," he said naïvely.

Ann laughed. "I think you must," she said.

"You mean it is old?"

"Older than most of the street organs that play it. Surely you recognize 'Il Trovatore'?"

"No," he answered. "It was simply a familiar tune."

She wished he could unsay that confession. It brought back the man he had nearly succeeded in effacing.

"You wonder at that?" he broke the pause.

"Yes," she admitted frankly.

"Just as you wondered when I told you I had come from America to Italy and seen nothing?"

"I think I understand."

"No," he rejoined, "you don't fully understand. You can't. And yet," he hesitated, "and yet you had your part in making me what I am."

"I!"

"Yes. It was you who set me at this work which has left no room in my life for the things you miss."

From another man she would have deemed this a preliminary move in a game of flirtation; but the serious Page was above suspicion.

"I can't comprehend it," she said.

"It was that last day at Old Point," he prompted.

"But I said nothing that could have influenced you. How could I, a mere schoolgirl? It's all a riddle."

"I hoped you might remember. When you mentioned Old Point this afternoon, I told myself that you had not forgotten. It was toward the end; we sat by the water waiting for your uncle. We were watching the gulls." He paused again expectantly.

"Ah, yes, the gulls," she responded.

Page shook his head. "No," he said, "you don't remember."

Ann was vexed with herself. The lapse at Rheims was bad enough; but now it appeared she had forgotten an incident that determined a man's career. "Believe me, I want to remember!" she said contritely.

"They were thick around us, the gulls," he went on, "scores of them, beautiful gray and white creatures, darting, diving, coasting on the air currents. You asked me questions about them. You seemed so absorbed in watching them, so eager to learn

their ways. I told you all I knew, and was ashamed that I knew no more."

Ann remembered now; but now it was she who felt ashamed. She had not cared a fig that May day on the Chesapeake for the gulls and their habits. She had been oblivious of everything save her new found power to beguile. It had intoxicated her to discover that she could make the handsome young lieutenant of engineers follow every turn of her head, every lift of her lashes, every glance of her eyes, and through sheer joy in the knowledge, sheer girlish coquetry, heedless as a bird's, she had posed and preened and chattered of she knew not what to prolong the absorbing play.

"You bring it all back," she said. "I remember, and it — it humbles me. Those were idle questions of mine. I could not dream that they would reach beyond the moment. I never looked beyond the moment then. I feel that I ought to ask your pardon."

"My pardon!" he exclaimed. "It is my gratitude you should ask. Don't you appreciate what you did for me? It was because I had no answer for one of your questions that I set to work to find it. My study of flight dates from that hour."

Ann drew a long breath. "It makes me afraid of life," she said. "Suppose — suppose that, instead of good, I had done you harm?"

"I can't suppose that."

"But there must have been times when you doubted?"

"Not one. It has been a long pull; but the game has always seemed worth the candle, even

though the candle has sometimes come high. You see, I hadn't much to live on after I threw up the service."

"Did you need to leave the service?"

"Yes. I had to give up that or my experiments. I couldn't manage both."

"And you did not hesitate?"

"No. I knew I was on the right track. I had followed up all the theories from Leonardo da Vinci's down. I knew what Lilienthal and Chanute and Langley had done, and I could see just where and why they fell short. I did not know what the Wrights were about. There were rumors, but nothing definite. I went to the same sources that they did; but I got my results by myself. If I had had more money to experiment, I might have been first; but I did not have sufficient funds myself, and people weren't sinking money in that kind of investment then. It was the motor, always the motor, that swallowed my savings. But hard luck stories aren't interesting," he broke off.

"Your story is," she assured him quickly. "I should like to hear it all. How did you contrive to live?"

Page laughed, but without bitterness. "Mainly on hog and hominy," he said, "with prunes for holidays."

"Seriously?"

"Yes, seriously. I saw that my neighbors could live on such fare, and adopted it."

"Your neighbors! Where were you?"

"In the foothills of the Cumberland Mountains. I was living," he laughed again, "on my ancestral

acres. Poor father! He hadn't anything else to leave me. He was just about as much of a business man as the average soldier. This farm was one of his speculations. He was sure it would yield coal or oil. I wonder what he'd have said to see it hatch an aëroplane? But it wasn't a bad place to experiment. Nobody bothered me. The people roundabout were all illiterate poor whites, who took me for a harmless crank."

"How could you see it through?" she cried.

Page stared into the past for a silent moment and then waved it away. "It wasn't precisely Como; but it served. It was there I got to the root of things. I found out what I could do."

"But the struggle wasn't over?" she said, thinking of Rheims.

"Not half over. I had done what I set out to do. I had built a machine that would fly. But I had no money to perfect it, no money to bring it to people's notice. I wrote my friends, and they answered — but no matter what they answered. They had nothing but contempt for a man who had chucked his commission for such folly as mine. I wrote to the War Department too; but my letters went into the pigeonholes. I might as well have thrust them in the fire."

"And then?"

"Then I tramped fifty miles across the hills to find work. I had heard of a party of engineers who were running a line for a new railroad. Luckily they were short handed. I stayed with them till I had earned enough to go elsewhere and do better. For two years and a half I stuck at that kind of thing,

saving all my salary I could. Meanwhile," his voice betrayed a hint of feeling, "meanwhile they began flying everywhere, Santos-Dumont, Blèriot, Farman, the Wrights. I don't begrudge them their success. They worked for it. They deserved it. Still, it was hard, realizing what my machine could do, to look on, to — but I'm wandering from the point. At last I scraped together enough to build a machine that embodied all my latest ideas, and to bring it to France, where they've all along been so keen about aëronautics. I knew I could outfly any aëroplane in existence, and I saw my chance to prove it to the world at Rheims. But at Rheims — well, you know more or less about what happened there. It wasn't altogether the motor, however. I let people think it was the whole trouble; but it was not. The engine was seriously out of order — the sea was rough and knocked the cargo about; but I knew I could remedy it in time. What I couldn't remedy was the hole in my pocket. The expense all along had been more than I expected, and I was at the end of my tether. I hadn't the money to make the necessary repairs. I hadn't even carfare back to Paris."

"You must have been desperate."

"Yes. It seems like a bad dream. I suppose I might have appealed to the management; but it hurt my pride as an American to go to those Frenchmen and own up that I was beaten. So I scoured the crowd, hoping to find somebody I knew. I would leave the sheds and walk by the tribunes, where in every form — in jewels, fine clothes, rich food — money stared me in the face. Twice I caught sight

of people I knew; but each time it was a man who had refused me in the past. One of them was guzzling champagne enough to have kept me in rations for a week. It made me feel like an anarchist. Yet I reached a point where I nerved myself to try that swine. I overheard him tell somebody where he was staying, and on Saturday night I walked over to Rheims to his hotel. He was out; but as I came away I ran into your uncle. But I hadn't it in me to ask him."

"There's nothing he wouldn't do for a son of your father."

"I know that now. He's the salt of the earth. But I couldn't hold him up. I got away from the hotel and walked the streets. I walked the streets all night. In the morning I went back to ask for that wine swilling pig; but he wasn't up. Then I drifted into the cathedral."

He paused again, and Ann's cheek grew hot.

"I couldn't tell you what that church is like," he continued slowly. "I only remember that I saw you!"

She waited breathless. Had he seen through her in that moment of trial? Had her silly worldliness brimmed the cup of his despair?

"I doubted my eyes at first," he went on. "Your uncle had not mentioned that you were with him, and for a moment I thought that worry had addled my brain. You see, you have been constantly with me since you set me thinking. You have grown into my work. That's why I believed my senses were cheating me. Then I saw that you were real."

Ann found her punishment too hard. "Oh,

why didn't you speak to me?" she cried. "If I had only known your trouble!"

"You did not see me. You went away without seeing me, and — afterward — I was glad."

"Glad!" Great as was her relief, it still left room for curiosity.

"You would have thought me as mad as a March hare had I spoken to you. It bewildered me to come upon you then when things looked blackest, you who were my inspiration. It was like an omen. I seemed to face the beginning and the end."

"I hope it seemed a good omen?"

"I could not tell," he answered. "It was only when you came among the sheds at Bethény that I knew."

She thought with profound thankfulness of the ruined glove.

CHAPTER XII

Ann was now most willing to obey her uncle's injunction to treat Oliver Page as one of the family. Morning dulled the sharp edge of last night's contrition. Her liking remained; but on reflection it was possible to exult a little in her share in his career. It was surely given to few women to influence two such men as Page and Rodoslav. The future sparkled with promise. What would be the attitude of these two toward each other? She foresaw a Prince less lordly, a modest man more bold. But to her distinct chagrin Page's introduction to the footing of intimacy met delay. She did not even speak with him by himself again in Cadenabbia. Consultations with her uncle monopolized the forenoon, and, luncheon over, he slipped away to Brescia as quietly as he had come.

Her own departure followed close, Justin striking camp with his usual dispatch.

"Paris to-morrow night," he announced. "I've wired to have dinner on the table at eight sharp."

The next evening accordingly found her confronting the row of half-cut volumes which struck a blue-stocking note amid the frivolity of the Louis Seize boudoir overlooking the Avenue du Bois. It gave her an odd sense of having definitely outgrown her girlhood to confront that collection. Was she the same Ann Milburn who had jumbled those books

together and thought with their aid to probe the inner meaning of history? How lifeless that heap of scholars' guesswork seemed beside the vibrating realities she had come upon without it. When Rodoslav came to take his place in such dull chronicles, what scholar of them all would have the insight to do him justice? She was wiser than they. She possessed knowledge they would never have. She was helping make history herself.

She had not seen Rodoslav again before leaving Italy. A note of apology had accompanied his roses the morning after the Corso dei Fiori. Apparently the last person in Cadenabbia to learn of the havoc he had wrought, he seemed as distressed as if he had sunk the entire pageant. Ann answered, warning him of her departure, and he, in token that their compact still held, telegraphed a Lugano florist to heap still other blooms upon her in her train.

Justin had laughed sardonically as the lavish tribute overflowed the compartment. "He'll quit that habit in Paris, if he turns up in Paris," he predicted. "Roses come higher there."

For once he was a false prophet, however. The morning after her arrival a brass buttoned boy from a shop in the Rue Royale took up the rôle the Swiss valet had played in Cadenabbia, while the afternoon of the second day Rodoslav put in an appearance himself. With his return to Paris he had undergone marked transformation. The simplicity of his dress in Italy had given place to the foppish elegance of a boulevard lounger who had no thought above the fit of a coat or the knotting of a cravat.

He read her amused glance. "Now that I shall be most busy, I must seem most idle," he said. "I am glad I have found you alone. We can arrange our program. While you remain in town I shall become a devoted shuttle between two points, the Avenue du Bois and Châlons."

"Châlons?"

"For flying lessons. The sooner I learn the better. I can't have too much practice. But it is of Paris I want to speak. I want to lighten your share all I can. I have been thinking over what you said in the old tower at Corenno. My fairy tales frightened you, I fancy?"

"No," said Ann.

"Bored you then, perhaps? Believe me, I wish above all things to be considerate of you. If I can, I want to make your helping me a pleasure, not a burden. Let us forget politics when we are together hereafter. Wherever we meet, let us make the most of the moment's brightness and ignore everything else."

"I am willing," she assented.

In her heart she felt a regret which grew with the weeks. Whether they met in her home or some bridle path of the Bois, on the links at La Boulie, at an Auteuil steeplechase, or under the candlelight of a dinner party, she was ever contrasting the frothy trivialities he voiced with his words beside Lake Como.

As for Justin, who overheard some of these banalities, he passed from amusement to scorn and from scorn to alarm, finally demanding of his wife whether she thought Rodoslav's title had turned Ann's head.

"Not but what the fellow can talk sense if he chooses," he qualified. "I tried him on explosion motors the other day when I ran into him at the Aëro Club and he said enough in two minutes to convince me that he knew the subject inside and out. He's not running such a fool chance in taking up aëroplaning as I thought. But his jargon with Ann — faugh!"

His wife's eyes danced. "Your own talk wasn't always practical, Justin," she reminded. "Before we were married, I remember, you once told me —"

"Never mind that, Helen," he interposed. "You'll admit I didn't go on like a blithering idiot all the time."

"You did not seem idiotic to me any of the time. That's precisely why I don't feel qualified to judge Ann."

"Do you mean to say that she —" He would not utter the distasteful possibility.

"I don't know what to think. I have only seen what you see. She doesn't discuss him."

"I suppose that's a bad sign."

"Ann's signs don't count. For that matter, she doesn't discuss Oliver Page."

Justin ruminated a moment. "Anyhow," he concluded, "we'll clear out of Paris shortly. Would you mind Italy again this winter?"

"I never mind Italy."

"We'll locate somewhere within an easy run to Verona," he said; "perhaps Venice, if we can get the same apartment on the Grand Canal. It's mainly on Oliver's account, of course. He has formed a business connection which I can't very well

explain. On the whole, I think it will be best to say nothing to Ann till just before we start. If he gets wind of our plans, that Prince of hers may take it into his head to tag along."

So it was that Ann received the briefest possible notice of their winter migration.

"I only know that we're bound for Italy and will motor down," said her aunt in breaking the news. "Your uncle spoke as if it might be for the winter; but one never knows."

"I'm glad we're to motor," remarked Ann, without astonishment, and dispatched a note.

A surprise awaited her, however, as they bowled out of Paris two days later. Ordinarily she managed the road maps; but Justin had them in charge this morning, and for a time she gave herself wholly to the joy of motion in the crisp air. Presently, however, a signboard roused her curiosity.

"Are you sure this is the right road, Uncle Justin?" she asked.

"Yes," he said.

"It seems a roundabout way," she commented. "Shall we sleep at Dijon?"

"We'll make Poitiers if possible."

"Poitiers!"

"If the tires hold out. If they don't, it may be Blois, Tours, anywhere on the Bordeaux road."

"The Bordeaux road! I thought we were off for Italy!"

"So we are," replied Justin calmly; "but I thought on the way it would be pleasant to spend a few weeks at Pau."

"Pau!"

Justin shifted in his seat and grinned at her. "Poitiers! The Bordeaux road! Pau!" he mimicked. "What are you, an echo?"

"But *Pau!*" she repeated.

"Haven't you always found that a good place to kill time?" he demanded. "I haven't heard there was anything wrong with it. Perhaps you've had private information. What's the drawback — fire, flood, earthquake?"

"Something worse."

"Asiatic cholera?"

"Worse yet."

"I give it up."

"Virginia Truscott."

"Humph!" said Justin, and faced the front. "I thought you had a real objection," his voice trailed back. "Mrs. Truscott isn't a drawback. She's an attraction. At last we're going to see her aviation suit."

The rear seat exchanged glances.

"I believe he really wants to see it," declared Ann.

"I'd forgotten she was there," said Mrs. Blair.

"After all her bragging!"

"Yes. She hasn't been in my mind since Cadenabbia."

"She advised us to come!" Ann gave the situation its final touch of gloom. "She'll think we took her advice. No matter what hotel we pick out, we'll find her on the doorstep looking like a mountebank and ready to fall on our necks."

But meanwhile there was France to be crossed; the poplar lined plain to Orléans, the soft valleys of Touraine, the high perched cities of Poitou, the vine-

yards of Gascony. Repetition never staled a motor flight through that engaging land, and Ann, thrusting the future out of mind, surrendered herself to the pleasures of the road. To reward her, Fortune three days later divested their arrival in Pau of its chief terror. No effusive compatriot in fantastic dress greeted them as they alighted before their hotel. The onlookers were one and all unfamiliar and English to the last face. It was tea time.

They were not to go unwelcomed, however. As they issued upon the terrace for an evening stroll, a rotund blond man suddenly obscured the view, and their arms were energetically pumped by that tireless cicerone and friend of the great, Price Buckley.

"What, Buckley, another vacation?" asked Justin, tenderly nursing the hand the rising diplomat had compressed. "Don't they give you any work to do at the embassy?"

"We're often busier than we look," said Buckley profoundly; "but, strictly speaking, this is a vacation," he hastened to add as he encountered a merry gleam in Ann's eyes. "Could anybody choose a finer place than this old capital of Béarn. That is Henry of Navarre's castle there at the end of the terrace, Miss Milburn."

"And those," Ann's voice was milk and honey, "those, I dare say, are the famous Pyrenees?"

"Yes." He took eager charge of the panorama. "The highest mountain is the Pic du Midi d'Ossau, the one on the left with the —"

A chuckle from the older man brought him up sharply. "When a woman asks you questions in that tone," said Justin, "go slow."

"You — you have been here before?"

"Only three seasons," confessed Ann with humility.

Mrs. Blair came humanely to the rescue. "We've none of us been here since the flying men made it a meeting place," she said. "Where are the aërodromes, Mr. Buckley?"

The young man made a vague dab at the atmosphere. "Out that way on the low ground," he replied. "But don't look for another Rheims. After all, this is only a practice ground. Some of the big men are here; but nothing spectacular happens. The aëro lions are nearly all absorbed in the business side of aviation now, and we have to depend on their pupils for thrills. Mrs. Truscott excites a great deal of interest." He smiled, and then, remembering his profession, made the politic addition, "Being a woman."

Justin boldly broached the subject that secretly agitated the group. "What's her costume like?" he asked.

Buckley again found his discretion taxed. "I never could describe ladies' clothes," he said. "It is — er — unusual and — er — well, picturesque. But you will see it yourselves. Everybody sees it."

"Does she actually fly?" asked Mrs. Blair.

"Not yet. She believes in going about it prudently. But though she hasn't got into the air, she is the pupil everybody wants to see. She has become a feature of Pau. I understand, however," he added, turning to Ann, "that she is to have a serious rival in popular interest. I am told that

Prince Rodoslav has decided to practice here instead of Châlons camp."

"What's that?" Justin became attentive.

"They say he wired two days ago for a shed and will probably arrive with his machine to-morrow. But, since you've heard nothing about it, there's probably no truth in the story."

"He's no chum of mine," disclaimed Justin shortly.

Beneath Buckley's mild exterior lurked the conviction that Ann treated him with more levity than a man in his position deserved, and he thought he perceived a neat chance to square accounts with his tormentor.

"Perhaps you knew about it, Miss Milburn?" he suggested blandly.

Ann mentally gave the plump young man a long black mark; but her face was serene. "Prince Rodoslav did not mention Pau to me," she said.

That she had found occasion during their first stop out of Paris to mention Pau to Rodoslav, she did not see fit to disclose. She had not expected her telegram to work such swift results. She had sent it in accord with their singular compact. Rodoslav had acted upon it with the impetuosity of a man who takes the course that chimes with his heart's desire. A spice of triumph gave flavor to her maiden meditations on the terrace. Could he now truthfully say that he was not in the least in love with her?

When morning again brought Rodoslav's valet to her door with roses she saw new meaning in the offering.

CHAPTER XIII

To Justin Blair the flowers brought different emotions. He had held his peace last night in the hope that the aërodrome gossip retailed by Price Buckley might prove groundless; but, confronting ocular proof that Rodoslav himself was at hand, his stoic calm exploded as abruptly as if it had encountered a large, efficacious thorn. This outburst, following hard upon Ann's exit from the common living room with her trophy, first vented itself in a mouth filling oath.

"I haven't heard you use that word in years," said his wife, with the detachment of a scientist classifying a beetle.

"I haven't felt so much like it in years," he declared, pacing the room. "I thought I'd given that rose buying nincompoop the slip."

"He ought not to be called names for buying Ann flowers."

"Nor for dogging her all over Europe?"

"Nor for admiring her," amended Mrs. Blair. "He shows his good taste."

"I believe you like the man."

"I don't dislike him."

"Would you want to see her lose her head over him?"

His wife smiled with the wisdom of a woman and

an aunt. "I don't think Ann's the girl to lose her head over anybody," she rejoined.

Justin took a disgusted stare out of the window. "Then I wish to heaven she was!" he inconsistently avowed.

"What in the world do you mean?"

"I mean I wish she'd quit her silly analyzing of people and fall honestly in love with Oliver Page. She couldn't find more of a man."

"Has Oliver taken you into his confidence?"

"Of course not."

"Or acted in any way to lead you to suppose he cares for Ann?"

"Certainly not. He's had something else to do."

She laughed again in her woman's way. "And yet you complain because she doesn't fall in love with him! Why, she hardly knows him."

"She'll have the opportunity now. Page is going to join us here. That's why it makes me tired to have this wholesale florist turn up again. If I could have guessed he would make for Pau, I'd have arranged to meet Oliver at Biarritz or San Sebastian."

"So we're here to meet Oliver?"

"Did you think I'd come back a fourth time for mere amusement?"

"I have never known you to go anywhere for that reason. I suppose you are anxious to see what these other aviators are doing?"

"Not morbidly anxious." Justin the Match-maker had become Justin the Man of Business. "Our competitors are not keeping us awake nights. In fact we hardly consider these people competitors at all. They have some rather pretty, but not very

practical, toys. We have a grown-up aëroplane." He glanced at his watch and took up his hat. "We'll run out and have a look at the toys this afternoon," he added. "This morning Page and I will be busy."

"This morning!" she exclaimed. "Is Oliver here in Pau?"

"He will be in fifteen minutes. I'm off now to meet his train. You may expect us for lunch."

"I shall be glad to see him."

"I hope Ann will," said Justin.

His fears on this score were baseless. Ann was unfeignedly glad to see him. He was welcome, not only for his own sake, which absence had done its eloquent part to magnify, but also as a foil to Rodoslav. Two cavaliers would lend more variety than one to her stay in Pau. If this attitude demands defense, she must go without an advocate. Ann was far from flawless. Younger than she thought herself and indubitably less wise, well aware of her beauty, more than a trifle spoiled by wealth, she had, to crown her imperfections, — there is no disguising it, — the makings of a destructive flirt.

Page basked in favor more than kind, and Justin, well satisfied, contrived after luncheon to give them an interval alone. He might with equal shrewdness have left a cat with a canary. But, whether or not the victim suspected danger, it was speedily made plain to Ann that he was not in the expansive humor of Cadenabbia. She was eager to recall that mood. It had stirred her to hear this self-contained man confess that she had determined his career. She wanted to be told it again, to receive assurance that

she still had her place in his thoughts, that her influence was abiding.

"I have thought a great deal about what you said to me in Italy," she confided as they waited on the terrace for her aunt and the artfully delinquent Justin.

Page did not brighten as she thought he ought at such news. "I should not have supposed you could find the time," he responded.

"Why not?"

"I read the Paris papers."

"Do you?" Not without strong motive would such a man occupy himself with the vapid columns which chronicled her activities. "I shouldn't have supposed you could find the time. It seems we were both mistaken. I've had other things to think about, it's true; but I couldn't forget a story that moved me as much as yours."

Her downcast lashes bore witness that he moved her still; but he remained stolidly obtuse.

"My own part in it was so strange, so unexpected," she tried again. "You must have seen how deeply I was touched by it."

"I fear I let my tongue run away with me."

Ann abandoned the demure for the direct attack. "Is that why you keep such a tight rein on it now?" she laughed. "I begin to think you are sorry you spoke so openly that night."

"I am," he owned unexpectedly.

"You are!" His blunt admission disconcerted her. "I hardly know what to make of that."

"I kept my troubles to myself when the pinch was hardest," he said. "I ought to have the sense not to get garrulous now that I'm out of the woods."

Ann could not let the matter rest there. The coquette in her egged her on. "I don't believe that's all," she persisted.

"All ?"

"Your whole reason, I mean. I can't help feeling that you're a bit sorry you talked to me in particular."

She expected a gallant denial; but he disappointed her. "I'm sorry I talked to anybody," he answered.

She was too vexed with him to press it further, and he volunteered no more.

The upshot was a domestic, but not loverlike, picture when Justin finally descended. Page was evolving smoke rings in silence; Ann, in spirit afar off, was immersed in the columns of "Figaro." Both hailed him as if he bore the keys of release from unspeakable boredom.

The matchmaker pulled himself together. "Come along," he called, with difficult jollity. "We'll motor out and watch the fledglings try to fly. It's gusty now; but the wind may drop at sunset."

Ann sprang at the summons as if she had never motored before. "I'll sit in front, if you don't mind," she announced.

"I do mind," said Justin without ceremony. "I intend to sit in front myself and hand some plain truths to the chauffeur. He's been neglecting his job. You sandwich yourself between your aunt and Oliver."

Still spiritually afar off, Ann complied. It is difficult, however, to freeze a person with whom you are tucked three in a seat. In spite of her the

temperature rose. She gave monosyllablic replies to the Person's civilities, she affected an absorbed interest in the highroad, she tried to shut her ears as he talked of aviation to Mrs. Blair; but she caught herself absently reflecting that the Person's voice had a most agreeable quality, and by and by, in another lapse of abstraction, she interposed an eager question and forgot her duty as a refrigerator altogether. Whereupon Justin, whose colloquy with the chauffeur had not prevented him from cocking an ear toward the rear seat, donned the smile of a contented Cupid who sees his darts planted where they will do their worst.

Plowing through the bog that some misanthropist had selected as the approach for motors, they entered the inclosure and faced the busy aërodrome. It was not impressive at first sight, that school of amateurs. Monoplanes and biplanes, a dozen or more in all, the machines droned and scuttled and lurched over the field, escaping one another by a series of miracles and never by any chance getting fairly awing.

"It looks like a farmyard in a panic," laughed Mrs. Blair.

"You slander the hens," said Justin. "Why don't they get aloft?"

Page alone took it seriously. "It's harder than you think," he commented. "They're wise not to risk their necks in this tricky wind. It would bother even an expert."

Ann's eyes dwelt speculatively on a machine that lay not far from the palings. No sound came from its motor, nobody, save a loitering mechanic, seemed

concerned with its fortunes. Inert, lifeless, a nuisance to the spectators, it foolishly dominated the center of the scene and did nothing.

"I wonder," she said, "if that doesn't belong to Virginia Truscott?"

"You dear thing!" cried a penetrating voice at her elbow. "How in the world did you guess?"

The Costume, rather sheepishly escorted by Price Buckley, was at last before them. Tongue-tied silence followed the general greetings. Power of speech was bereft them. The optic nerve was so taxed that the sister senses suffered atrophy.

"Well?" said Virginia. "What do you think of it?"

Mrs. Blair made ineffective noises in her vocal chords. Ann, meeting the suffering eye of Price Buckley, was stricken with a cough. Justin alone rallied.

"You look as fetching as," he groped for a simile and found inspiration in her leggings, "as Pocahontas herself."

Mrs. Truscott clapped her hands. "That's quite the nicest thing I've had said to me," she declared. "The gentlemen of the old school are the only ones who can turn a compliment. Why couldn't you think of that, Mr. Page? Or you, Price?"

"I did suggest Rosalind and Maid Marian," reminded Buckley, smiling feebly.

"But they had nothing to do with it. It took Mr. Blair to see that my motif was Indian. I've used buckskin everywhere I could and borrowed a semi-barbaric scheme of ornament. I think the red and yellow beadwork gives it just the right accent

of the free and untrammeled that an aviation costume demands. It's unconventional; but so is flying, especially for women. But tell me candidly, Ann dear," she dropped her voice in an aside none but the deaf could miss, "do you think my kilt a wee bit short?"

Ann could not resist the chance to smite. "For flying or walking?"

"Why, for flying, of course."

"I dare say not — for flying," she answered.

Justin again poured oil. "Aren't we to see you take a turn?" he asked.

Virginia shook her blond head wearily. "Ah, no," she said. "I work so hard out here mornings that at this time of day I have just enough strength left to visit with my friends. You've no idea how difficult it is."

"So Page tells us."

"Yes, he would know," she returned with unflattering emphasis. "But some of the aviators make light of it. Why, Latham told a party of his pupils that it was as easy as pushing a baby carriage across the street! I've never pushed a baby carriage anywhere, — thank goodness, — but I have driven a high-power motor in a cup race, and I know that was child's play in comparison. It was Prince Rodoslav who gave me the story." She turned to Ann with a meaning smile. "But very likely he mentioned it to you himself. You saw so much of him all the fall."

Page's glance told Ann things he had left unsaid on the terrace. She read that he regretted Cadenabbia because he thought he had made a confi-

dante of a woman who loved another. Her reply was directed at him rather than Virginia.

"I fancy you think I saw more of him than I did," she said.

"Possibly." Virginia perceived that she had the superior Ann at some sort of disadvantage and smiled her playful skepticism. "But you must blame him for misleading me. He certainly gave me the impression this morning — our sheds adjoin, by the way — that you had become great friends. All the pupils are greatly excited over his coming here. My stock went up tremendously when they discovered I knew him."

Mrs. Blair raised her glass and surveyed the field. "Is he out there?" she asked.

"No. He'll hardly be ready before to-morrow. An aëroplane needs no end of tuning up after a railroad journey. He has been superintending the mechanicians all day. Speaking of mechanicians, I must see that my man puts the machine away before it gets any darker. I wish the days weren't so short. Half the time the wind keeps up till sundown. To-night it hasn't dropped at all."

"Have we come out for nothing?" cried Ann. "Won't anybody fly?"

"You won't find an amateur who'll give his elevating rudder a twist. Blèriot wouldn't mind going up; but he's busy teaching." She looked round for her escort. "Come, Price. You must take me back where you found me. People do stare so when I walk about alone."

Punctilious Mrs. Blair bethought herself of the absent. "And Mr. Truscott?" she queried.

"Still fishing."

"You don't mean at Como?"

"Oh, no, right here. He has discovered something with fins in the Gave de Pau and is perfectly happy. Come, Price."

She left a conversational hiatus which Page was the first to bridge. "She is right about one thing," he remarked in a tone that implied her complete lunacy in all others. "This is no weather for amateurs."

Almost with his words they saw another monoplane wheeled from its shelter and a pilot, wearing a close-fitting helmet of leather, climb to his seat just behind the wings. The roar of a powerful motor reached them, the propellers became a whirling disk of gray, and the machine, gliding forward, gained speed, lifted free its shores and tailpiece, balanced an instant on its skate as a bird might balance, and then, with a bird's grace, at a bold aspiring angle sought the heights.

"Some professional, of course," said Mrs. Blair. "Is it Blèriot?"

"That's not a Blèriot machine," instructed her husband.

"Vive Rodoslav!" called a knowing spectator, and the aviator's identity was made clear.

But the cheer of welcome which the crowd instantly took up suddenly died away. The newcomer was not to triumph without a struggle. Buffeted by contrary currents, swerved from his course, tilted repeatedly at a perilous angle, Rodoslav fought his way to the calmer upper air and bore away in a splendid circle down the field.

"Well, I'll be hanged!" ejaculated Justin.

"Superb!" exclaimed Page. "He soars over those chaps below like a hawk above a henyard."

"No; it's the dragon fly," said Mrs. Blair, as the monoplane, still curving, imprinted its full profile on the glowing west. "It's the dragon fly we saw at Rheims."

But to Ann — thrilled, not a little proud, and yet withal vaguely fearful — there came unbidden another image. Black against the blood red sky, Rodoslav evoked a dread shape from the folklore of his own land. It was the vampire.

CHAPTER XIV

She witnessed that night at the Palais d'Hiver a play that continually brought Rodoslav to mind. It was a characteristic French comedy, acted with characteristic French verve, and handling what are commonly called French situations with an airy freedom that ignorance of French idiom permitted the decorous Anglo-Saxon audience to applaud. Ann also happily had her difficulties with the idioms; but the plot was lucidity itself. It dealt with the fortunes of a royal visitor to Paris and set forth the satirical thesis that democratic France still loved Kings and that Kings still loved the women of France. Its relevance to Rodoslav lay in the fact that the visiting monarch hailed from his special corner of Europe, and exemplified a rakish set of morals which Ann was appalled to realize might not be greatly different from Rodoslav's own.

Extended as had been their wandering, the tone of the Blair household had remained fundamentally simple. Their American friends having been unimpeachably respectable, it did not occur, even to Justin, to question the moral credentials of the acquaintances who came their way abroad. To Ann social irregularity was merely something abnormal, like drunkenness or crime, quite apart and sure to remain apart from her existence. When they crossed

her thoughts, the other women Rodoslav had known had been shadowy figures; but now, bodied forth in these frail creatures of the drama, they became in a flash terribly concrete. He had told her they had been thrown his way to distract him from dreams of empire, and the phrase had meant nothing. Now it was only too clear. How could his life have differed from his counterpart's across the footlights?

In the first moment of enlightenment this unknown, pagan Rodoslav blotted out the man she had admitted to her friendship, and she told herself that she could never see him again. Then their alliance rose to plague her. She had given her word that she would help him; she could not break it without explanation. But how could she explain? How could she discuss the unspeakable? Yet she must! It came back to that in the end. She could not unburden her task upon her aunt or Justin. She had come alone into this morass; alone she must find her way out. She must tell him the truth. Rodoslav would not be put off with a lesser reason.

And yet — perhaps — he might! Her thoughts turned to the man who sat at her side. What was he thinking of this shameless play? Did he also see Rodoslav behind the footlights? Did he know more than she of his past and marvel at her tolerance? Page never seemed more wholesome, more likable than now. Had it been possible she would have appealed to him to extricate her. But it was useless to trifle with that. She could no more betray Rodoslav's enterprise to him than to her uncle. In one way only could Page serve her. If he would bestow on her a tithe of the devotion he gave to

aëroplanes, she could soon convince Rodoslav that their compact must end. Of his own accord he would end it.

But Page was no mind reader. Indeed, so blind was he to his opportunity, that he even precipitated the meeting she dreaded. After the curtain fell upon the third act, which the party painstakingly neglected to discuss, Justin suggested a turn in the palmarium. If he had his matchmaking in mind, no inspiration could have been more luckless; for almost the first person they met was Rodoslav. Ann spied him in the distance, and, panic-stricken, would have turned their steps in another direction, but Justin's momentum was too great and in another instant they were face to face.

Ann's first thought was the highly feminine reflection that if good looks were a defense, Rodoslav would go unblamed. Her second was a perception that an astonishing change had come over her uncle. Justin's bearing was a mixture of reserve and deference which, as his wife pointed out later to his disgust, oddly reflected one of the title-worshiping characters of the comedy.

As for Page, he met Rodoslav as a fellow aviator. "You made a magnificent flight to-day," he said. "I congratulate you."

Rodoslav showed his gratification frankly. "That pleases me," he responded. "You know. We shall see you in the air here, too, I hope?"

"My machine is in Italy."

"What a pity! You have picked up a tremendous reputation for a man who never makes a public flight."

"Then I must take care not to give myself away," said the American dryly.

Ann listened with the impatient thought that if he would study her with half the shrewdness he displayed in guarding his secret, her dilemma would soon solve itself. But, far from divining her need of him, he deliberately put himself beyond her reach. As the group moved on he chose the society of Mrs. Blair.

Rodoslav instantly made the most of his chance. "Are you going to be unreasonable?" he asked in a low voice.

"Unreasonable?"

"And unjust?" he added.

This unexpected attack startled her. "What do you mean?" she asked.

"Isn't it both unreasonable and unjust to confuse me with a stage character?"

He, at least, did not lack powers of divination. His intuition bordered on the uncanny. "Why do you say this to me?" she demanded.

"Because I must. I sat where I could watch your face to-night, and I knew that you saw me in 'Le Roi'!"

There was no hiding anything from this man! Ann perceived that the struggle was upon her, and met it with what courage she could.

"Is there no resemblance?" she queried.

Rodoslav's face changed as she took the offensive. "Yes," he admitted, "there is a resemblance; but it is a triviality."

"A triviality!"

"There has been something besides pretty women

in my life. You know that. After all, do they matter, those others?"

"Not to me," she disclaimed quickly. "That is— " she hesitated, uncertain how to explain that they mattered both everything and nothing.

"I am not so stupid as to think you jealous," he said.

Ann's cheek burned. "Stupid would be too mild a word if you did think so," she retorted.

"Yes," he agreed, "it would; but I understand you perfectly. This play has given you disagreeable things to ponder. You have discovered that I am a human being as well as a historic name. I supposed you realized it before; but it is very evident you did not. You are wondering whether I am the sort of person you ought to know."

"No," she replied, "I am not wondering. I am in no doubt whatever."

He looked at her sadly. "I thought you above prejudice," he sighed in weary irony. "But when you sit in judgment, remember that I have committed no greater follies than most men placed as I am placed, that I have committed less than some. By the only code to which I am answerable I am respectability itself."

"You are under no obligation to tell me this."

"I feel that I am. It is one of the oddities of the situation that I feel constrained to excuse things that it has never before occurred to me required excuse. In fact, you make me harbor regrets. Will you remember those regrets also, as you sit in judgment?"

"I am not your judge," she returned coldly.

"I am not unwilling that you should be both judge and ally."

"I can be neither," she answered. "I am sorry you chose as your confidante a woman who — who disappoints you; but that is certainly your fault, not mine. I must ask you to release me from my promise to help you; but I want you to feel that you can trust me still. Nothing that you have told me — "

"What are you saying?" he interrupted. "I can't release you now."

"You must! I can't say more than I have. It has been most painful for me to discuss the thing at all." She looked about for the others. "My aunt will be waiting."

"Your aunt considers you quite safe in my company and has gone on," he pointed out grimly. "I am not a pariah in her eyes."

"Nor in mine. You exaggerate."

"Do I? How then shall I describe a man so base that you would destroy the hope of years, his whole future, in order to be rid of him?"

"Destroy your future!"

"Perhaps you think I still exaggerate? If you do, I must beg you to reflect that it is no small affair in which I am concerned. I cannot afford to undervalue my obstacles. Haven't I made you realize that there are men who would rather see me dead than disturb the present arrangement in the Balkans? For over two months you have given me immunity from their spying. In a month more, perhaps in less time, even in a few days, I may go to my work. Not in a hundred years has the time

seemed so ripe. Greece, Turkey, Bulgaria, all Southeastern Europe, is in a ferment. The newspapers, inspired by the chancelleries, tell you that there is no danger; but I know the pulse of those people as they do not. War may flame out tomorrow. When it does, my hour will have struck, unless —" His gesture left the issue with Ann.

The fiery magnetism of his personality had never done him more eloquent service. It might be absolute unreason, it might be sheer immorality, but she could not help feeling that she had taken a narrow view.

"I don't want to imperil your cause," she said; "but —"

"It is for the cause alone I am pleading," he assured her quickly. "Forget me and my imperfections, if you can. Think of the millions you will serve. It is for my people, not myself. Be their ally a little longer. Tell me you will!"

The voice of the individual may be disregarded; the voice of the people will not take no for an answer.

Ann heard scarcely a word of the final act of the luckless play. Rodoslav, not the royal rake, filled her mind's eye. The sinner she had gone forth to stone had turned and bombarded her. He had made her outlook seem petty, her tardy scruples selfish. Why, if she had not perceived his past as a bar in the beginning, had she had the folly to raise it now? She should have kept upon the impersonal footing she had so imperiously required at the outset. Now it was he who was impersonal. He had not pleaded with her like an erring lover. He had effaced himself in his cause. Humanly, she was less to him than

those nameless casual Others. The triumph she had savored with his morning roses turned to nought.

The one definite result of it all was a further swing of the pendulum toward Oliver. On their way home, during the little midnight supper that followed, and for several days thereafter, Justin saw his protégée favored as the difficult Ann favored few. He even made the discovery that Rodoslav's morning offerings found their way to the waste basket with unflattering dispatch. As for Page himself, he dropped much of the reserve that had marked his first coming. It was not easy to be cautious toward Ann at her friendliest. He liked to have her rally him upon his seriousness. He would even pretend gravity for the sake of the mocking challenge of her eyes and the miracle of her smile. And Ann — Ann of the magic smile, the lovely mouth, the cornflower eyes and the chestnut hair which showed copper glints in the sun — knew that she beguiled him, as she had beguiled him at Old Point, and was happy in the knowledge.

But how different this dalliance! Page was no longer *a* man. He was possibly *the* man. Not that she put it thus baldly. Indeed, her whole feeling was so fluid that she did not formulate it even to herself. With the measure of his regard for her in doubt, she let herself go no further than the admission that, if he were to sue, she would listen with sympathetic ear. There was no vagueness about her sympathy. The incident at the Palais d'Hiver had left her with an intense craving for the wholesome and the normal. Her compact with Rodoslav had lost its glamour. If war did not free her

from its yoke, something else must. If Page would only let her see, let Rodoslav see, his real heart!

His real heart! How industriously she probed for that elusive organ in those days of reaction.

"Have you an ideal woman?" she plumped at him once when their talk, as talk will, veered toward the difference between sex and sex.

Page shook his head with emphasis. "Give me the actuality," he said.

"That may mean you can't idealize us."

Page waited for her smile and, having seen it, smiled himself. "It means only what I said," he answered. "I am content with the actuality."

Ann tried to read a personal tribute between the lines; but it took imagination. "I suppose it's safer," she said. "You'll not be disappointed when you marry."

"Much safer," he agreed. "What would an everyday man do with an ideal wife?"

"Or an everyday wife with an ideal husband? But I fancy not many men think as you do. They want us to be feminine, and yet they are impatient when we are most feminine and say or do things without knowing why. One can't be a woman and have reasons for everything."

"Or human, for that matter. Are men so reasonable?"

"You are. You don't expect too much of us."

"I would not have a woman expect too much of me."

Ann's lashes swept her check. "For instance?" she prompted.

Page's color rose. "I mean," he said, "I would

have her realize that for years I have been practically a hermit, that I am behind the times in nearly everything that would interest her, that I still have little leisure to give to the softer side of life, that I am poor, in debt —" He ended the catalogue abruptly. "No," he added as if to himself, "I am not reasonable. Far from it."

She got no nearer than that in her probing; but it seemed a promising start. Give her other such moods, and she would solve the riddle. But Page's leisure was more semblance than fact, and such moments were rare. He and Justin were much together at one or the other of the aërodromes and, even if Page joined her at golf or for a motor ride, Ann perceived that his work engrossed him constantly. One day he utterly forgot that he had promised to go with her and the Truscotts to a meet of the Pau hounds, and they rode away without him.

Rodoslav came, however, and in surprising fashion. Ever since his arrival he had delighted the aërodrome spectators with his impetuous ascents and splendid curves, and he now outdid all his other performances by striking across country to join the hunt. His descent demoralized the meet; but it was conceded that he had done something brilliant in the way of aviation, and he was made the lion of the hour.

Ann kept on the outskirts of the crowd about the aëroplane; but Rodoslav's eyes searched her out. Coming straight to her side, he laid his hand upon her saddle, and by attitude and lowered voice advertised his devotion.

"I want people to know that I did it to meet you," he explained. "We have not been seen often enough together."

"Is it my fault if you called while I was out?"

"Surely not. But it is odd, isn't it, that little Pau should make more demands on your time than Paris? But this will help along the make-believe. I wish you would let me take you back."

"By aëroplane!"

"Why not? I know you want to fly."

"I never told you so?"

"Not in so many words, but I was not blind at Rheims."

"Oh, Rheims!" she said. "I have changed in many ways since then."

"I know that too," he replied, studying her face; "but I don't think you have changed in this one way. I believe in your heart there is nothing you want to do so much as to fly."

"I should be afraid when it came to the point."

"You think that as you stand below. In the air you would not be afraid. Let me prove it to you. It is perfect flying weather. Come!"

"You're joking, I know."

"You are mistaken. I am most in earnest. Why, there are a dozen women here who would jump at the chance."

"Why not let one of them jump, then?"

Rodoslav declined to smile with her. "They are not my allies," he said.

"If our alliance calls for aërial journeys, you must find me a substitute," retorted Ann.

"Would you let me take you up quite apart from

the alliance? We could arrange to fly on one of the aërodromes when nobody was about."

"No, no," she said. "It's impossible!"

"Impossible because I suggest it?"

"Why do you press it so? I do not wish to go up with any one."

Rodoslav eyed her piercingly an instant and then, with no other word, bowed his princeliest and walked away.

Virginia reined her horse confidentially alongside. "Not a tiff, I hope?" she smiled.

Ann opened her lips to snub, but thought better of it. "He was teasing me to fly back to Pau," she said.

"And you refused!"

"Naturally."

"Naturally!" Virginia rolled her eyes heavenward. "My dear Ann, when will you begin to appreciate your luck?"

As she watched Rodoslav take his departure, Ann realized that the fine madness that had gripped her at Rheims still dwelt in her veins. Had it been Page who asked her to return with him, she would have accepted. From this secret admission it was but a step to the query whether a flight with Page was impossible. Only last night she had heard that, during the absence of spectators, he had not only gone up as a passenger several times, but once at least had borrowed the machine of one of his Pau acquaintances for a flight by himself. What more salutary rebuke could she give Rodoslav than a flight with Page? She was quite certain that a rebuke was necessary. His bearing too confidently

assumed that their relations were unaltered. She rode home with her head full of it.

Page being Page, she finally decided to hold her peace till the right moment and then strike boldly for her end. The prime difficulty was the right moment. Justin and her Aunt Helen must be eluded; for their opinion of Mrs. Truscott's aërial ambitions left her in no doubt of their opposition. The general public which paid its five, ten, or twenty francs to gape must also be absent. Yet Rodoslav should be there to see. Clearly, the project demanded tact and the fickle helpmate of tact, good luck.

CHAPTER XV

Luck, however, seemed in no haste to assist her. Justin haunted the aërodromes as if he had no other aim in life, and if he chanced to absent himself when spectators were few, one or the other of her essential factors was sure to fail her. Finally, after a day of more than common abstraction, Oliver dashed hope to the zero point by vanishing from Pau altogether. Her aunt could throw no light, and Justin would not. Blithely inferring that a tender interest prompted her inquiries, he deluged her with poor jokes, and then, as if not satisfied with a mystery already sufficiently dense, disappeared himself.

Ann's first tidings of the missing aviator came appropriately from that bureau of universal information, Price Buckley, who, just as Justin followed Page into obscurity, returned from a brief excursion into the foothills beyond Oloron, whither he had gone with Mrs. Truscott's husband to explore a fisherman's paradise.

"The fisherman's paradise was a fish story," he told her. "It was as mythical as the trout brooks of a railroad advertisement. Still, Truscott and I had a good tramp and stumbled on some quaint Basque types. At least we thought they were Basques. We also ran across some notables," he added with increased animation. "I don't suppose

you have forgotten Baron Saccarello, whom I presented to you in Paris?"

"Hardly," smiled Ann. "I met him again in Cadenabbia, by the way."

"How he does dodge about the map!" said Buckley admiringly. "Rheims, Paris, Cadenabbia, Biarritz, and the backwoods — all since the end of summer! I knew he was in Biarritz; but it rather took me off my feet to find him in the out of the way village where we stopped for lunch."

"And was he surprised to see you?"

"Decidedly. I think I even startled him. But he could not have been more cordial. He mentioned the talk we had between the acts of 'Rigoletto' and inquired after you."

"Really! I believe you are making that up to flatter me."

Buckley laid a dimpled hand across his waistcoat. "On my honor!" he asseverated. "But I haven't told you the whole of the surprise. Saccarello was not alone."

His muted tones warned Ann that another celebrity was forthcoming. "Royalty in disguise?" she hazarded, laughing.

"You're not so far wrong. Saccarello presented him as Count Something or Other, a Polish name; but he saw, of course, that I knew it was an incognito. Any one in my profession would have known. I must respect their wish for secrecy; but I can say that the Count's real rank is semi-royal. He is, in fact," the words came impressively, "a Russian Grand Duke."

"What in the world were they doing in that place?"

Buckley nursed his mystery a moment longer. "Guess," he invited.

"Hatching a Carlist plot?"

"Nothing so romantic."

"I give it up."

"They had come to shoot wild boars. They heard at Biarritz that the country people were bothered, and His Royal Highness — I should say the Count — took it into his head to run over."

"That sounds like a Russian," said Ann.

"There was still another person with them," Buckley went on. "To me, he was the biggest surprise of all."

"Do make it a King this time!" she begged.

"In a sense he is a King."

"In a sense? I believe it was the Carlist pretender, after all."

"I mean in the popular way of speaking. From all one hears, though nobody sees him do anything, he might be called a king of the air. I mean Mr. Page."

"Oh!" said Ann with a start.

"And quite at his ease he was," added the diplomat. "I believe he had met Saccarello before; but he couldn't possibly have known the Grand Duke. It is simply another instance of the way the world bows down to the men who fly. The aviator has a pass-key to every door."

Ann brimmed with questions; but she prudently restricted herself to one.

"Did Mr. Page mention what had taken him into the foothills?" she queried.

"Oh, yes. It seems that he also hoped to shoot a boar."

Twenty-four hours later Page and Justin Blair dropped back into Pau as unceremoniously as they had gone away, and Ann again began to take a lively interest in the weather. The day of their return she fulfilled a promise to go riding with Buckley. There had been a high wind all the morning, which meant inaction at the aërodromes, but was no drawback to a gallop. Ann always chose gusty days for horseback riding, and not even Price Buckley's society could mar the pleasure of the outing. A stiff north wind stopped her escort's mouth whenever he became unduly instructive or sentimental. Turning at last, far up the Bordeaux road, Ann put the wind at back, and led her plump squire a race which made his cheeks pinker than her own.

It lacked perhaps half an hour of sundown when their return brought them near the aërodrome where Rodoslav made his ascents. The air, which had all day been so troubled, was now hardly ruffled by a breath.

"Flying weather again," said Buckley. "I wonder if any of the aviators are about?"

Ann reined in at the entrance. "Suppose we find out," she suggested.

She spoke quietly; but her heart pounded. No crowd! No relations! It was surely the time if Page did not fail her and Rodoslav was there to see.

"Have you the run of the sheds?" she asked. "You seemed to go where you pleased at Rheims."

Buckley beamed at the chance to serve her. "Yes," he said, "they don't mind me about. I know several men who are taking lessons, to say nothing of

Mrs. Truscott. Suppose we ride in at the aviators' entrance?"

A lorry with an aëroplane blocked their way for a moment; but the delay had its compensation, for, as she waited, Ann spied Rodoslav's Swiss valet, who she had latterly discovered was a chauffeur and mechanician as well, cross the inclosure beyond carrying his employer's aviation helmet. She was assured of her desired audience. Then, as they entered the gate, she perceived the one missing factor of her combination. From one of the nearer sheds the workmen were wheeling a biplane. Beside it, dressed for flight, walked Page.

Ann acted with decision. "My horse shied back there at the gate," she said hurriedly. "I think I'll go on foot among the machines." Slipping from the saddle, she thrust her bridle rein into Buckley's hand, and, followed by his astonished regard, walked rapidly away.

"At any rate, it's not the Servian," he reflected, recognizing Page, and, seeing no one to relieve him, resigned himself to the rôle of hostler with a fat man's sigh.

Page, unconscious of her coming, set his foot on the machine.

"Oliver!" she called.

He turned, stared, and came quickly to meet her. "What's wrong?" he demanded anxiously.

"Nothing at all," she reassured. "Why do you ask?"

"It was your hurry — your using my first name—"

"Would you rather I didn't use it?"

"What a question!"

Ann produced the famous smile. "It slipped out naturally enough," she owned. "You see, we all call you Oliver among ourselves. I've a favor to ask. Take me with you?"

"Take you with me!" he exclaimed. "You don't mean —"

"Up? Yes, I do. There's nothing I want so much. There is no one," the smile was at its climax now, "I'd rather go with than you. Please say you'll take me — Oliver!"

Page looked long in her pleading face. "You make it very hard —" he began.

"I sha'n't, I assure you," she whipped in. "I'll perch anywhere you say, do anything you tell me. I won't get hysterics or nerves — I'm not that kind — and if —"

"But, my dear Miss —"

"Just Ann," she interposed, "unless you'd rather I went back to Mr. Page."

"No, don't do that," he protested. "And don't — above all — don't misunderstand me when I say that —"

"Please — *please* don't think of objections!" she begged. "There aren't any. It couldn't be more calm. I couldn't have a safer pilot. I couldn't have a more sensible costume." She struck her boot smartly with her whip by way of illustration. "Wasn't it made for riding? But perhaps you'd rather I borrowed Mrs. Truscott's!"

A ghost of a smile came and vanished amid his gravity. "Have you told your people?" he asked.

"What does that matter? There is no one they trust more than you."

"That is the best of reasons why I shouldn't do it."

"It isn't a reason at all. I am my own mistress. You are your own master."

"No," he took her up, "not quite. If this were my own aëroplane, which I know to the last bolt, if your uncle, who trusts me, had given his consent, then perhaps — "

"Perhaps! Would it still be perhaps?"

"Don't misunderstand me," he pleaded. "The best of these machines, the cleverest of pilots, have narrow escapes. You can't glance at a newspaper without realizing it. This very biplane I'm trying, because it has points I must study, broke a man's leg at Juvisy. Good as it is, it's still imperfect. One runs a risk —"

"I'm not afraid."

"I am afraid for you," he rejoined, puzzled by her eagerness. "Don't think I don't want to take you up. There is nothing I'd rather do. It — it has been one of my dreams. But I can't do it now — this way —"

"You absolutely refuse?"

"I must."

Tears of angry disappointment filled her eyes. "I've learned the value you set upon my friendship," she declared bitterly, and swung upon her heel.

Page followed for a step or two. "It's the value I set upon you," he tried to tell her. "Listen to me, Ann! Don't you see it's because I care so much, because I —" He stopped, realizing the futility of words or pursuit.

Ann believed herself steering a direct course toward the patient Buckley; but passion proved a

faulty compass. With her anger still hot she came face to face with Rodoslav.

He greeted her as quietly as if a brilliant apparition in a riding habit, her cheeks like his morning roses, her eyes shooting scorn, dropped in among the sheds every day in the week. But what he said or she made answer Ann knew not. The one significant thing in the universe was the fact that he wore his aviation helmet.

"I have come to accept your invitation," she said.

"To fly?"

"To fly."

His machine, pushed from its shelter, awaited him. The Swiss and a workman or two stood ready to speed their ascent. Without another word he helped her mount to the passenger's seat and adjusted the straps. Taking his own place, he released some mechanism, and the motor began its rhythmic beat; another movement, and with its familiar snore and an unfamiliar hurricane of air the propeller became the flying disk she had so often seen from afar, and they sped forward into the field. Then, almost at once it seemed, so swift was their start, the wide spreading wings dipped to each side, balanced to a perfect poise, and she knew that the great moment had come. They had cleared the earth! They had joined the fowls of the air!

But at the outset she could not give her whole mind to the miracle. Her anger was still warm. It was necessary to picture Page in his discomfiture. He knew now what she thought of his caution. Then the aëroplane as a machine began to obsess her. She felt it to be alive, as she often felt a motor car to be

alive. Its pulsing engine seemed a beating heart, the overwhelming drone of its propeller an unearthly voice. It had a personality. It was a being to be feared and propitiated, a joss, a demon, a jinn. Yet it seemed a docile monster. As they neared a boundary pillar the air that swept her face developed a resistance which shook them as a wave will shake a vessel, swerving them aside, tilting their wings; but a touch upon the wheel under Rodoslav's hand righted them instantly and they soared on in perfect poise.

Till now she had held her gaze straight to the fore, seeing only a far vista of foothills and clouds beyond the flying blades; but she dared a look below as they turned, and with it first realized their terrific speed. The swimming plain dizzied her, and with tight-shut eyes she waited till the giddiness should pass. It was gone in a twinkling, and as they bore triumphantly on she looked again and, without vertigo, without fear, saw, as she could not see in that first plunging look, that they had left the confines of the aërodrome. He meant her to remember her first flight. It was to be no perfunctory circuit of the course. They swung in a great climbing circle toward Pau itself.

She saw with a thrill that they were already very high. Her untrained eye could not estimate their altitude. She only knew that home-going peasants in the fields seemed pygmies, the trees mere shrubs, the red roofed houses toys, the winding Gave de Pau a narrow ribbon which glittered in the sunset. Only the blue chain of the distant Pyrenees held its normal place in the scale. Then, as they swept near and at last above it, the oddly transformed city absorbed

her. Pau no longer crowned an eminence. Its site looked scarcely higher than those of the low lying villages dotting the plain. The château had shrunk to insignificance, its towers mere flat squares; the red-legged soldiers in the caserne below seemed ants; the Palais d'Hiver was simply an oblong spot in the green opening of the Parc Beaumont; the once imposing rank of hotels and villas of the Boulevard des Pyrenees a row of humble roofs. It was Pau, and yet not Pau. The sprawling boulevards assumed too much importance; the Place Royale and the nobler streets were unjustly blurred. It lay there in the waning light divested of character, a travesty of itself, an ill drawn, crudely colored, monotonous map.

Ann smiled down on it all like a goddess from a cloud and wondered what the mortals were about. On that stretch of terrace — if that was a terrace — people doubtless still sipped tea, and it might be, nudged their neighbors to look aloft. Perhaps her aunt and uncle — Justin secretly contemptuous of the tea drinkers — were among them. Perhaps Mrs. Truscott was informing all who would listen that they beheld her friend, Prince Rodoslav. Perhaps Buckley would quote the Almanach de Gotha. Then she remembered that the rising diplomat could hardly be sipping tea in Pau and holding her horse at the aërodrome at one and the same time. Poor Buckley! She would be kind to him hereafter, as became a goddess. The one being who should feel the weight of her august contempt was he who denied her this supreme experience. She fervently hoped she would find Page rooted to the spot where

she left him. Her descent would lack something of its triumph if he were not there to see.

That moment would soon come. Pau slipped away beneath and they rounded northward under a sky flooded with saffron afterglow and hung with a pale moon. It was now that Ann made the prime discovery of a journey packed with surprises. For an interval she had been hazily aware of a new phenomenon in the heights. Now she gave it conscious heed. If such things were possible up here where all was changed, she would have said they had their echo. Somewhere in the ether a motor seemed to throb, a propeller to drone in emulation or defiance of their own. As their curve for an instant narrowed, she threw a look backward to rid herself of the uncanny illusion; but instead of melting into twilight the fantasy gained substance. She not only heard pursuit, she saw it.

Circling as they circled, sinking as they sank, a winged shape followed. Black against the sky at first, it took definite form as the descending spiral brought it facing the west, and even its pilot became distinct. Tortured, desperate, Page confronted her across the abyss. Powerless to aid her if she came to harm, yet unable to endure suspense below, he could only follow near and suffer.

Ann shut her eyes with a shudder, thrusting that agonized apparition away as she had recoiled from her first sight of the receding aërodrome. This too brought vertigo. The glory had faded from her triumph. She wanted only to touch earth and lose herself amid the homely commonplaces of life.

The aviation field spread beneath them again.

Yonder in the dusk lay the low street of sheds. Then the engine ceased its tumult, the propeller its moan, and they planed soundlessly down to their starting point, grounding without jar. As the machine came to a full stop, Rodoslav, who during their whole flight had not uttered a syllable, rose in his place, watched Page's landing, and then, turning, helped Ann alight.

"Are you also in love with him?" he asked in the midst of her incoherent thanks.

Her feet upon the earth, Ann became once more a daughter of Eve. "Also!" she repeated.

"Answer my question," he charged. "I know why he followed us."

His tone affronted her pride. "Whether I am or not is wholly my own affair," she answered.

"No," he said; "it is my affair, too. I have the right to know."

Was he thinking altogether of his cause? Did he see Page merely as an intruder in the game of blinding the eyes of Europe? His face told her nothing.

"I deny your right to know," she replied slowly; "but I will tell you. I am in love with nobody."

She left him to make what he could of that last emphatic word and went to make her peace with a sulky, undiplomatic, but not implacable, Buckley.

CHAPTER XVI

By the time she dismounted before her hotel in the Boulevard des Pyrenees, Ann had accomplished two things. She had disordered Buckley's wits so effectively that it was he, not herself, who ate the humble pie of apology, and in the midst of this exercise, which imposed only a slight strain on her faculties, found time to change her mind. It was now decreed that Oliver Page should be treated with lenience.

The first outward sign of this humane resolution was a more than careful toilet for dinner. Earnest study of the problem convinced her that the particular gown of her wardrobe which would best medicine the wounds of her victim was the one she had worn in Italy the night he confided how great a part she had played in his life. He was probably as heedless as most men of the subtleties of feminine dress; but she hoped its pale lilac would stir suave memories and prepare the way to an understanding less vexing to her peace of mind than the present state of things. She was ready to admit, if he proved amenable, that she had been capricious, hasty, and unjust. She even pictured herself as a sweet penitent asking his forgiveness.

So minded and thus arrayed, she descended to dinner. Page was wont to join them at the entrance

of the dining-room, and it was here that she in fancy laid the scene of their meeting. To relieve its awkwardness, she made a pretext for loitering behind her aunt, and then hurried forward to carry the position by storm. This piece of strategy was quite wasted. Oliver was not at his post, and they passed in without him. Ann was chagrined and made nervous by this failure. It would be trying to face him for the first time directly across the napery. Reflecting that it might mend matters to have him by her side, she asked Justin to change places with her.

"I'd like a better view of that Pittsburgh woman who wears a different set of jewels every night," she explained. "She must have to travel with a safe."

"A bucket would do as well," said Justin. "They're paste."

Ann did not find the bejeweled lady absorbing. Her eyes more frequently sought the napkin folded over its bit of bread that awaited Page at her elbow. She dreaded his coming like a child who must meet punishment. Yet at the same time she eagerly wanted him to come and, as course followed course and he still delayed, her impatience mastered her reluctance.

"Isn't Oliver to dine with us to-night?" she asked at last.

"No," said Justin. "He has left town."

"Left town!" she repeated. "Gone away from Pau?" Her disappointment was too great for concealment. She confessed it in face and voice alike.

But it drew no jocose comment from Justin. He was grave with a gravity that had weighed upon him

ever since his return. "It was a sudden call," he vouchsafed, "but not unexpected."

Ann waited for details; but none came. "Will he be away long?" she questioned.

"For some weeks, perhaps."

She crumbled her bread in silence, vainly seeking to adjust herself to the news. She could not endure the thought that a single night should lapse before she proved to him that she was not the shallow creature he now must deem her. Her pact with Rodoslav still debarred her from unfolding the true cause of her anger; but she believed she could somehow make Page feel that she deserved better than his contempt. It appalled her to picture the image of her which he must have borne away with him. Must weeks go by before she could show its falsity?

"Tell me where he is?" she demanded abruptly.

Her tense voice startled them. "On a train between here and Marseilles," said her uncle.

"I mean where is he going? I want his address."

"I can't give it to you."

"Do you mean you don't know? There is something I must write him — something he ought to be told at once. You must find out his address for me, Uncle Justin. It means — oh, I can't explain what it means; but I must get word to him!"

Justin and his wife exchanged glances.

"Oliver has gone to look after a business matter of the highest importance," he said. "I will forward a letter if it is urgent."

His caution touched off an explosion. All her vain regret, her self-disgust, her pent-up worry, her baited nervous force, discharged itself upon him with the

same whimsical choice of conduit with which a thunderbolt selects now a hovel and now the spire of a minster to wreck its imperious violence.

"Why do you make a mystery of this precious business?" she demanded. "Is it something too holy or wonderful to tell Aunt Helen and me? Aren't we intelligent enough to understand? Can't we be trusted with a secret? You are not so clever at keeping secrets yourself. I know more than you think. Even if you do go off to out-of-the-way villages —"

"Stop right there!" warned Justin. He glanced round at the neighboring tables; but her voice had kept its usual level and no one had heeded them. "We'll talk this over later," he went on quietly. "I realize that something has got on your nerves. Try a cup of strong coffee."

The meal came to an end in silence, and they left the dining-room. Ann expected an immediate reckoning; but Justin had faced nerves before, and settled himself in the smoking room with a cigar till reflection should do its work.

"Write your letter, dear," suggested Aunt Helen.

It was a sage recipe for the malady; but counsel that augured ill for a temperate letter to Oliver Page. Ann wrote, as she still felt, at concert pitch, with an outpouring of self-condemnation she would never have lavished in spoken words. Singularly free from vanity would be its recipient if he did not read more than she meant between the lines! Her mind empty, she sealed the missive and herself delivered it into Justin's hands.

"Don't think twice about what I said awhile ago," she entreated, quite herself now. "Something upset

me. I don't really care about your affairs. You know that."

"Yes, I know," he said; "but I want to ask you a question or two before we drop it. I'll be upstairs shortly."

Twenty minutes later he came to her. "Now, Ann," he said, "what is it you know?"

"Really nothing at all," she protested.

"Out with it!"

Her budget seemed lean indeed now that she must turn its contents to the light. "I know that Oliver did not go back in the hills to hunt," she stated.

"What else?"

"And I know whom he met there. One of the men was Baron Saccarello, the other was a Count Somebody who — "

"Yes?" he prompted as she hesitated. "Let us hear about Count Somebody."

"He was really a Grand Duke, a Russian Grand Duke."

Justin's gaze narrowed. "Go on!"

"They were very friendly with Oliver."

"What did they talk about?" he cross-examined.

"I haven't the least idea."

"You've reached your limit?"

"I have told you all I know."

"Absolutely all?"

"Absolutely."

"Did Price Buckley seem curious?"

Ann widened her eyes. "I did not say it was Price Buckley who told me."

"It wasn't necessary. Truscott wouldn't have mentioned it. He probably never gave the thing a

second thought. But Buckley is different. Did he seem to think the meeting was prearranged?"

"I don't think so. He merely said all three had gone there to shoot wild boars. I don't think you need trouble yourself about him."

"I sha'n't," said Justin laconically.

"Or about me," she added. "You see for yourself how little I know."

"It isn't what you know, but what you may imagine."

"I won't concern myself with it at all, Uncle Justin," she promised contritely. "I am sorry I lost control of myself downstairs and worried you."

Justin dismissed her apology summarily. "The milk is spilt," he responded. "There isn't much actually on the ground; but it looks big. I see I must tell you a few things."

His wife spoke for the first time. "I don't think I care to hear," she said. "It will not be a free confidence on your part. You feel forced to tell. That's not our way, Justin."

He gave her a glance of shrewd appreciation. "Don't think I haven't wanted to tell you, Helen," he rejoined. "If it had been wholly my affair, you would have shared it from the first. But it was first of all Page's business; then it became Italy's business; and now," he weighed his words an instant, "now it has even got to be the business of Russia." He turned an ironical smile on his niece. "You see, Ann, the secret is of some consequence after all."

"I see."

Her response was so meek that Mrs. Blair took up

her defense. "The child has apologized once," she reminded. "Go on with your story."

"Well," said Justin, "it of course began at Rheims. It was there I made up my mind that Page could give the other aviators cards and spades. It did not bother me that he wasn't entertaining the grandstands. He told me what he had been able to do elsewhere and, coming from Joe Page's boy, that was enough. I promised to back him for further experiments, — he had ideas for improvements come to him at Rheims just as he's had them here and everywhere, — and I agreed that when the machine was in shape I would finance a company to manufacture it and put it on the market. I advised him to lie low till he was ready; but he felt sensitive on the money question and said that, if he could, he'd like to get away with some of the Brescia prize money. I couldn't head him off, and down he went. Providentially, his motor got a few more jolts in transit."

"Providentially!" said his wife.

"The word isn't any too strong. If he had flown at Brescia, he would have smashed every aëroplane record known."

"What harm would that have done?"

"It would have shown our hand to every manufacturer in the business. But I needn't go into that. He didn't fly till afterward, and then we managed to keep the performance fairly quiet."

"Then he did do the things the Milan paper said?" cried Ann.

"He did them and more. He has an aëroplane that embodies the stability, the speed, the safety, in

fact, everything the other fellows are groping to get. I haven't the right to go into details. In that respect we still owe secrecy to our distinguished customers."

"But you can tell us how you got the distinguished customers, I hope?" put in his wife.

Justin chuckled. "You helped, Helen," he said.

"I helped! How could I?"

"By introducing me to Saccarello. It was a tremendous stroke of luck that sent him into Italy by way of Como. The moment I laid eyes on him I realized that our way to approach at least one war department was plain. That night I delivered my first lecture on aëronautics and, what's more to the point, I held my audience. Before we said good night he had agreed to look Page's machine over and, if it satisfied him, take it up with the Italian Government. Next day we met Oliver and arranged for a test which nobody should know about. After that it was plain sailing. It was mere child's play to prove to them that we stood first and the others nowhere. Italy has kept us busy ever since."

"But Russia?"

"That's where European politics comes in," he responded. "Austria drove Italy and Russia into each other's arms when she gobbled up Bosnia and Herzegovina last spring. Do you remember how the Czar dodged Austrian territory when he came to visit Victor Emmanuel not long ago? That straw shows how the wind is blowing, and so does this business of ours. We had no sooner closed the deal with Italy than Russia got busy. First it was

her embassy in Rome. Then the Paris people took it up. Now you know why Page and I have been hanging round Pau. We were waiting for that little talk with 'Count Somebody' which young Buckley stumbled upon the other day. Do you really think, Ann, he swallowed the wild boar story?"

"Yes," she said, "I feel sure of it."

Justin laughed. "Price is a rare diplomat! Before long he'll read in his morning paper that Russia has decided to build an aërial fleet and never dream that it was discussed under his very nose. The fact is, we have agreed to manufacture for Italy and Russia exclusively."

"I am glad everybody will soon know about it," sighed Mrs. Blair. "I dislike secrets."

"Everybody will soon know that Italy and Russia have adopted Page's aëroplane; but it doesn't follow that everybody will soon know just what the machine can do. Possibly the general public will have to wait till it is put to practical use."

"You mean in fighting, of course?"

"That's the practical use a war department naturally has in view."

"How dreadful!"

"It depends on the way you look at it. Some people think aëronautics will make war such a ghastly affair that men will stop it altogether. Don't think of Oliver's machine as a destroying angel. Call it a dove of peace."

"Ah, well," she commented, "whichever it turns out, I am glad that Oliver's success is assured. It will mean great things for him."

"Yes," he assented. "Italy isn't flush; but

Russia still has rubles to spend. Between them, they will make it decidedly worth while."

"I wasn't thinking of the money alone. I suppose there will be honors and decorations."

"Yes," he agreed again, "and titles too, if he cares about them. Oliver need ask odds of nobody. He will be able to live as he likes and where he likes, associate with the best, aim high when he marries." He eyed Ann discreetly as he rounded off his sentence; but the hint seemed lost. "About that letter of yours, Ann," he added, with a manner scarcely as offhand as he would have liked, "it will surely catch him at Verona. You'll easily guess that's he bound for Petersburg; but he means to stop off at the plant first."

Ann appeared to shake herself awake. Decidedly she had written in too humble a strain to a man who would presently have the world at his feet! "I won't bother you to send my letter, Uncle Justin," she said. "I have changed my mind."

"Not bother me to send it!" he repeated. "It's on its way. I took it round to the post office myself."

CHAPTER XVII

But Ann had not yet reaped the full consequences of her impulsive leap into space. Mrs. Truscott's mechanician, who understood English, happened to be at work at the aërodrome in the shed adjoining Rodoslav's, and to overhear, not only Ann's first words to the princely aviator, but, by patient waiting, the still more significant conversation that transpired on their return. As this man enjoyed the freedom of speech which Virginia accorded to all chauffeurs, golf caddies, jockies, and like dependents of sport who came her way, he took prompt occasion to tell his employer what he knew. In this spirited narrative, the lorn figure of Price Buckley played its part, and to Buckley she forthwith addressed herself with such a convincing air of knowing all about the incident that the missing details were soon in her possession.

"But I can't understand how it has got about," he puzzled. "I have said nothing, and all the time I waited in the aërodrome I saw only a few French workmen and the Prince's valet."

"Perhaps he told," suggested Virginia. "I rather think Rodoslav is the one man in a thousand who is a hero to his valet. In a way it's a heroic sort of story, isn't it?"

"I can't say that of my share in it," said the diplomat with a pale smile. "Not that I am blaming Miss Milburn," he added hastily.

"Who could — sweet girl?" returned Virginia, charitably. "I only hope, though, it won't get into the home papers."

"Lord! so do I!" ejaculated Buckley fervently.

"Fancy the paragraph *Gotham Gossip* would make of it!"

"I don't want to fancy it."

"I just see it," declared Virginia. "'Prince and Pursuer! Chased Through the Clouds!' There is no end to the variations they might play on such a theme. They've already commented on Rodoslav's attentions to Ann, you know."

"Yes, I know," he responded, as if his collar choked him, "and I'd like to horsewhip the editor."

"I had no idea you felt so strongly about it. But perhaps they've also paragraphed you?"

Buckley waved a fat magnanimous hand. "I ignore the comments upon my — my personal appearance," he stated. "A man in official life must reconcile himself to caricature. But what I do resent is the impertinent assumption that Miss Milburn is to marry Prince Rodoslav, when —"

"When she might better marry a certain rising young diplomat?"

"When I don't believe there is a word of truth in it," he concluded lamely.

Virginia became strictly judicial.

"Whether Ann is engaged to Rodoslav or not," she said, "people are sure to think she ought to be after this Daisy Miller fling of hers."

"Oh, I say!" he protested. "That's putting it rather strong."

"I fear it's true. We have to remember Rodo-

slav's," — she sought a euphemistic phrase, —"suppose we say, princely — reputation."

Not being as yet a completely finished man of the world, Buckley grew red. " Something ought to be done," he declared. "She can't know, of course. A hint from you, perhaps —"

"To Ann!"

"Or to Mrs. Blair."

"It would amount to the same thing. In either case, I should make an enemy for life."

"I can't see how. I should think she'd take it as a friendly service. It is merely a matter of advising her not to make such a comrade of him."

"Merely! How little you know about us women, Price. If she had the faintest notion that I had a finger in it, she would go to any extreme to show me it was none of my business. Yet we're good friends."

Buckley dismissed the mystery as insoluble. "Then what can be done?" he demanded.

Mrs. Truscott considered. She had no sinister motive in interfering. Ann's occasional toplofty demeanor never vexed her beyond the moment. She believed, as she had just said, that they were good friends, and she most emphatically wanted the friendship to continue; for she also believed that Ann would beyond all doubt marry Rodoslav. It would afford keen satisfaction in the future to speak in terms of privileged intimacy of "my friend the Princess," and she saw no harm in hastening that bright day if it lay in her power. Why not let this other suitor, who stood not the remotest chance of success, give the fillip that should precipitate Ann's decision?

"Suppose you drop her uncle a hint?" she suggested.

"I?"

"Why not? You know Mr. Blair well. You saw the whole thing."

"But it would look as if I were talebearing."

"The tale is public property. Even last night I heard people asking questions about the two aëroplanes that flew over Pau at sunset. That kind of escapade can't be hushed up."

Buckley gave a grimace of distaste. "No," he said, "I can't see myself doing it."

Virginia was disappointed. "I should have thought it just the kind of thing a diplomat would know how to handle," she rejoined. "But still — you haven't been a diplomat long."

It was a shot in the air; but it pierced a vulnerable spot. Stronger even than his admiration of Ann was the vanity that affairs requiring superhuman tact were the natural prey of his intellect. Hence it fell out that he decided to take action, after all. Be it set down to his credit, however, that he gave no more thought to Virginia's proposal. Come by the story of the aërodrome adventure as he might, Ann's uncle should not hear it from him. The course he marked out for himself was bolder. He meant to appeal to Ann herself.

Opportunity trod close on the heels of resolve. Half an hour after he parted company with his tempter, he met Ann issuing from a shop in the Rue Henry Quatre, and, encouraged by her mood, which was adorably pensive, came swiftly to his mission.

"I can't account for it at all," he said, as they took their way across the Place Royale; "but that little affair at the aërodrome has already become public property."

"Public property! Do you mean people are gossiping?"

"I'm afraid that's the word for it. One can't very well sail over the housetops and escape comment," he added, paraphrasing Mrs. Truscott. "Aviation is still a novelty, even in Pau, and when a young lady of social prominence flies with a Prince and is followed by a distinguished aviator with whom she has just had words — well, the story doesn't lack interest."

He plumed himself that he had made a deft beginning. If only matters could be kept on this suave level all would be well. But, in a trice, Ann the adorably pensive became Ann the alarmingly militant.

"Are you quoting gossip or making inferences?" she demanded, coming to an abrupt halt.

Buckley's dimples betrayed signs of distress. "I am telling you what people know," he said with dignity.

"You are sure?"

"If I weren't sure I shouldn't have mentioned it."

Ann digested this for half a dozen paces. "Why in the world did you mention it?" she queried ungratefully. "What was the use of annoying me?"

"I hope you don't think I want to annoy you," he protested. "I only want to put you on your guard."

"Against what, pray?"

"Against giving people occasion to gossip still more."

He had such an air of leaving things unsaid that she waited for him to go on; but the diplomat found his way thornier than he had dreamed and walked gingerly.

"I don't expect to fly again in Pau, if that's what you mean?" she aided him.

"It isn't all I mean; but it would help."

Ann lost patience. "Don't beat about the bush," she enjoined. "If you have something important to say, say it."

Thus prodded, Buckley forgot the discreet phrases he was revolving and blurted out a query he had not meant to put at all.

"Do you care for Prince Rodoslav or don't you?" he asked.

Ann surveyed him in calm wonder. "Do you expect me to give a serious answer to such a question?"

"I wish you would. It is certainly serious, and it would help me immensely."

"Help you!"

"I mean in what I wish to say."

She believed she sighted a Buckleian proposal ahead, and, being no mere collector of scalps, thought to give him warning.

"Do you think you'd better say it?" she asked more gently. "Are you sure it would do any good?"

He mopped his face perplexedly.

"How can I tell unless you answer my question? It's bad enough either way. If you do care for him,

you'll feel insulted. If you don't care for him — why you'll still feel insulted, I'm afraid."

Ann rejected the proposal theory. "You may be sure I shan't take offense at your wishing to do me a service," she rejoined. "If there is something I ought to be told, you may put Prince Rodoslav wholly aside."

The diplomat sighed and took the plunge. "If you don't intend to marry Rodoslav, don't see so much of him," he advised bluntly. "You can't afford it. Do you understand?"

"Yes," said Ann, after a long pause.

There were things in her face that made Buckley shrink from his handiwork. "You'll find it hard to forgive me, I'm afraid," he said; "but I could not go to your people. I thought the square thing to do was to come directly to you."

"You were very — courageous."

There was matter for reflection in her choice of adjective; but Buckley, who feared the worst, accepted it at its face value with a gratitude that manifested itself in startling phenomena. His pink face became crimson, his eyes moist, his nether lip tremulous.

"Miss Milburn — Ann," he stammered, "since you've said that, I want you to know that I couldn't have spoken as I did if I had thought there was a chance, a real chance that I —"

Ann saw the goal toward which he was now unmistakably bound and took swift measures to save his pride. "You are a friend worth having," she whipped in, giving him her hand. "I want to keep you *as* a friend as long as I can."

Buckley stopped, stared, gulped his avowal, and then returned her clasp convulsively. "Count on me!" he said. "Count on me every time!"

She thought he presented rather a pathetic figure as he left her at the door of her hotel, and she did him the honor of a whimsical wish that he might yet encounter a paragon among women who deemed avoirdupois not a blemish but a charm. After that poor Buckley's lacerated feelings did not long detain her. He was overshadowed by his message. For the moment he embodied the world — the world which had served notice that her position was untenable.

For a week thereafter her first thought at waking and her last at night was of the post. She no longer regretted the warmth of her letter to Oliver. She would have had it warmer still. She calculated the day it would reach Verona, the hour he would receive it, the time he would need to dispatch his reply. To the writing of that reply she assigned the briefest of intervals. She figured him dashing it off in a fever of impatience to let her know that she remained the lodestar of his existence. She was sure he loved her. What else had signified that tragic face seen across the abyss? As for herself — well, when his letter came she would be better able to define her feeling.

As the week slipped by she had to alter her picture of the impetuous letter writer. He had evidently paused to weigh his words. He found it hard to efface the wretched memory of the aërodrome. Ignorant of the motives that underlay her appeal to him there, he could not comprehend the violence

of her reaction. It must seem to him an act of heedless caprice, childish, irrational. He would require time to recall her in gentler moods, to remember her as she really was, a woman lovable, and not incapable of loving. He would read and reread her letter, sleep upon it perhaps, before he sat down to reply. That a response so deliberated might lack the assurance she sought, she would not consider. It was first of all an answer she must have.

Eight days after Page's departure a letter postmarked Verona, but addressed to Justin Blair, reached the family living room simultaneously with Rodoslav's morning tribute. Justin slit the envelope with the gratifying knowledge that his niece's eyes neglected the flowers, and when he had read the missive himself he considerately briefed its contents for whom they might concern.

"Oliver writes that he had a comfortable trip," he announced. "Everything is shipshape at the plant, and he leaves for Russia to-night — no, he left last night. He says he is glad to be busy again after his loafing spell here."

Ann's heart sank. If work was a relief, Pau must indeed be a weary memory! "Does he mention hearing from me?" she brought herself to ask.

"No," said Justin, wishing he could say yes. "The rest is pure business in reply to a note of mine."

"Of yours! Did you too mail him a letter the night he left?"

"No. Mine did not go till a day or so after. Did you expect an answer right away?"

"N-no," said Ann, her voice curiously muffled in Rodoslav's roses.

CHAPTER XVIII

Ann took her chagrin out of doors. Four walls could not contain it. At least — at very least — he might have acknowledged her letter! That bitter reflection repeated itself endlessly as she paced the terrace, her eyes on the scurrying clouds, her thoughts in the depths. Delay she could have excused; but total neglect was beyond pardon. Whatever he might become, Oliver Page should henceforth be as naught to her.

The man himself annihilated, the structure she had built upon him crumbled, and she squarely confronted the hazard that Price Buckley, as the world's spokesman, had succinctly pointed out. Since Page had failed her and the Balkan unrest still halted, as for years it had halted and might halt for years to come, just short of war, she saw no alternative to breaking her promise to Rodoslav.

The sight of the Palais d'Hiver, before which her unheeded steps had brought her, gave a concrete reminder of the particular Rodoslav whose comradeship she could not afford. But it also told her that her point of view had shifted since the play opened her eyes. She had somehow acquired a wider tolerance than was possible to her that night. She could even censure the world for misjudging him. What did it divine of the patriot, the statesman, the true prince, the real Rodoslav? Her distaste for the thing she must do threw a veil of charity over the

frailties the mob saw rather than his virtues. He was no hypocrite. He had admitted the truth frankly. And, after all, as he himself had asked her, were they greater follies than most men would have committed in his place? He had been reared under an abnormal code, and the code rather than the individual should be held responsible. The individual had owned that he harbored regret.

But the world that misjudged him would also misjudge her. There was no evading that. She must make it plain to him and appeal to his generosity. Surely he could find a way to release her without jeopardizing his cause.

The Parc Beaumont offered a quiet refuge after the wind-swept boulevard she had just traversed, and, striking behind the theater, she followed the main road to its eastward turning. Diverging here, she absently cast about for a seat unpreëmpted by the British nursemaid, and so passed the tennis court without perceiving Rodoslav amid the handful of bystanders who watched the game. He saw her, however, and, straightway detaching himself from the group, overtook her in a sheltered bypath.

"I did not know this was one of your haunts," he said.

"It isn't," she replied, loath to find her task imminent. "Is it one of yours?" she asked to gain time.

"I am fond of tennis," he responded, capturing two chairs and disposing them for privacy. "I've had several chances for a game lately. There hasn't been a day fit for flying since we took our spin. The wind dropped just long enough to accommodate us."

"I wish it hadn't," sighed Ann, embracing the opening.

Her tone arrested him. "You are sorry?" he said, disregarding his own chair and looking down at her thoughtfully.

"Yes, very sorry."

"Do you mean it has caused trouble, our flight?"

"It has changed everything."

"Surely not!"

"But it has. It has made it impossible for things to go on as they have. Please sit down. We must face the facts."

Rodoslav complied; but he readjusted his seat as if she herself were the essential fact to face.

"Perhaps you have found after all that you do love somebody?" he suggested, studying her face.

"No," said Ann, with emphasis.

His eyes, no less than her stout negative, reassured him. "Then it's not past mending," he asserted confidently.

"You'll see that it is. Gossip is hard to mend in any case; but when it is based on facts that everybody knows are true," she hesitated and then, wanting a better phrase, fell back on Buckley's, "I can't afford it."

"I see," he said gravely. "It's the Others again."

"Yes," she assented hurriedly, "it's the Others. They make my position impossible. You have the right to say that I should have taken them into the reckoning long ago; but I didn't realize. I know I must seem a simpleton; but I didn't realize. It took that play —"

"I understand," he answered as she paused again.

"In fact, I have understood all along. It has been — may I say so? — one of your charms, your American charms, that you were unaware of many things that Europe treats as commonplaces."

Ann had no relish for the compliment. "That's over with," she rejoined bruskly. "We have come to the crossroads."

"To the crossroads, yes," he assented quickly; "but we must not part company. Has it been so dull, helping me?"

"Dull? No; but it isn't a question of dullness. I am glad if I have been of help; but I can't go on helping."

"You can if you will. I can't spare you now. I showed you the other night how critical this time is for me. It is you — you and no one else — who have made it possible for me to carry on my work. You promised not to desert me when I need you most. Is your promise nothing?"

"It was made in ignorance. I have no choice but to break it."

"But you have a choice."

"The sacrifice of my reputation! Even if I could ignore gossip, my family certainly would not. But I can't ignore it, even to help you to a throne —"

"Don't put it that way," he protested. "It is of my people I am thinking."

"Not even for your people, then. There are probably women large-souled enough to pay such a price; but I am not one of them."

Rodoslav leaned forward and held her eyes with his. "And I would not have you pay it," he said, "not even for the cause. I want to put an end to gossip

at once. And it can be ended at once. Two lines in to-morrow's paper would do it. I mean an announcement of our engagement."

Ann returned his look a moment. Thereupon a spark danced for an instant in her eyes, leaped to the corner of her mouth, and then, defying restraint, became with a flash of white teeth an honest laugh.

Rodoslav started back with a flush. "I am serious," he asserted. "I meant precisely what I said."

"Is that your usual way of saying it?"

He rose to the utmost heights of his princely dignity. "I have never before asked a woman to marry me," he said.

"To marry you!" Ann sobered. "Were you asking me to marry you?"

"Yes," he replied stiffly.

"Then it's all the more extraordinary. Is that," her smile came hovering back, "is that the way it's done in circles where marriages are arranged?"

"I don't understand."

"Suppose you had taken a fancy to the Austrian Duchess you mentioned in Cadenabbia?"

"I can't suppose it." He shrugged expressively.

"Well, then, suppose her as beautiful and charming as if she were not a Duchess at all. Would you have gone about the business in just the same way?"

Rodoslav met her in her own humor now. "Yes," he rejoined, "if she had taken pains to show me that a different way would be distasteful. Would you rather I had begun by swearing I adored you?"

"And perjure yourself to be romantic! Ah, no. But you must forgive me for seeing the funny side

of it. My American training is to blame. Of course I realize that it is an expedient of the moment, a temporary patching up of our queer alliance."

"But it is more than that. I am making you a serious offer of marriage, with all the implications of such an offer, all the obligations —"

"You seem to forget —"

"No, I don't forget," he took her up. "Let me finish. I could not propose such a thing to you unless I felt it binding; but the obligations will be all on my side. You will be bound to nothing. I don't forget the facts, the obstinate facts. They are unchanged. But, while they have put an end to our friendship, they don't stand in the way of an engagement. It is a mad paradox, but sober truth. By the same reasoning, which is the reasoning of society, they are no barrier to marriage; but I can't expect you to push logic that far now. Some day you may think the man I have become of more account than the man others tried to make me. If you do, my future will be your future in the fullest sense."

Ann stared straight before her into a thicket of palms, pondering the inexplicable. This should have been a moment of triumph. She had received an offer of marriage from the claimant of an imperial throne. It was no mere chimera, that claim. Rodoslav's chance was no more tenuous than Louis Napoleon's had once been. He possessed the advantage of a personality which that shadowy eyed adventurer had lacked. Given the hour, he might ride his way into history with her beside him. But Ann was not triumphant. She was bewildered.

He had made her his strangest of proposals in the teeth of facts that, judged by the standards of her upbringing, should have put him beyond the pale of a nodding acquaintance. He had even suggested that she might yet condone these offenses. Could it be that he knew her better than she knew herself? Was it credible that she might some day overlook the Others? And for the sake of one whose real heart was still a sealed book? She could not say he had made his offer because he loved her. He had left love out of it as completely as if it were merely a matter of politics, a royal match. He remained, as he had been from the outset, a baffling enigma, and therein lay his great appeal. An enigma to herself, she unconsciously oriented to him as her interpreter. He continually revealed hidden possibilities of her own nature.

"It will not be dull, that future," he said, as if he read her thoughts.

"It is the present I'm thinking of," she answered, not quite ingenuously. "I don't want to spoil plans you have taken years to perfect. If a pretense of an engagement —"

"On your part," he amended.

"On my part is the only way — why, then —"

"You consent?"

Ann took counsel an instant longer with the date palms. "Yes," she said, "I consent."

She could not blame the witchery of an Italian night for her decision. She made it in the full candor of a French day.

Rodoslav's dark eyes shone the brighter; but for all his manner told she might merely have agreed to

a game of golf. He was outwardly an unsentimental strategist, with no thought save the thwarting of the enemy. He did not even thank her.

"I will see your uncle this afternoon," he said.

It was the present she thought of now in sober truth. "Don't forget that he is an American uncle," she warned. "He has a prejudice against international marriages."

Rodoslav nodded his comprehension. "I shall convince him of my disinterestedness," he replied.

It was from Justin himself that she learned how he had fared. He came into her room toward evening and stood looking down at her with an expression that she knew not whether to call tender or disapproving. She was at a loss how to conduct herself. Had the situation been normal, she would have drawn his rugged head down beside her own; but it was abnormal, and she could not be insincere with him.

"So it's Rodoslav!" he said at last.

"Are you surprised?" she asked, for want of a better reply.

"No, I can't say that. We've had warnings."

"Warnings!" She caught at the chance to break the solemnity. "That's the final touch of gloom. I didn't expect you to be pleased; but to have you treat it as a calamity!" She sprang from her seat and, resting her fingertips on the table behind her, faced the inquisition more at ease.

"I don't want to be a killjoy," he responded, still searching her face. "I do want to be pleased. I am only trying, Ann, to satisfy myself that you are not gambling with your happiness."

"Don't you know me better?"

"So it's Rodoslav!" he said at last.

"I don't know you at all. You've puzzled me all your life, while lately —" Language failed him.

"I puzzle myself sometimes."

"Is this one of the times?"

"Yes," she admitted.

Justin raised a minatory finger. "Then look out!" he warned. "You want a clear head in this business. You'll have to marry something besides a title. There's a man concerned, a flesh and blood man."

"Don't you suppose I realize that?"

"No."

"You are mistaken."

"I'd like to believe it. I want to see you happy in your marriage; but I'm not sure you are headed that way."

Ann attempted a digression. "How does Aunt Helen look at it?" she queried.

"Like a woman. She sees it as a great match. As such matches are measured, I'm quite willing to grant that it is. There is no flaw in Rodoslav's credentials. As a *title*," he bore down heavily on the word, "he must be listed as gilt-edged."

Ann fancied the ghosts of the Others stalked near, and took prompt action to lay them. "I think there are some things to be said of him as a man," she retorted. "Title or not, he is one of the most interesting human beings I have ever met. He makes most men seem commonplace. I have seen a side of him that other people don't see. He isn't an idler, a drone, a mere descendant. He is a man who can think for himself — yes, and for others. He is a leader, a real Prince!" She justified herself in that championship and her cheek warmed with her words.

Justin's brow cleared. "You've relieved me immensely," he said.

She perceived that she had combatted an imaginary foe. If the Others had come to Justin's knowledge, he was not thinking of them.

"Do you mean you are relieved to hear he isn't the mere cipher you thought him?" she asked.

"No; to hear you say he's not the cipher I thought you thought him. That's what bothered me most. Till you defended him, I thought the man himself played second fiddle in your plans. As for me, I've learned better than to undervalue him."

Ann stared. "Since when?"

"Since he came to me to-day. He talked to me as a man should talk in such circumstances. He might have been an American."

This final tribute, Justin's superlative praise, gave a sharp spur to her curiosity. "What did he say about me?" she asked.

Justin promptly shielded his fellow male. "Nothing you'll coax me to repeat," he answered.

"But you might at least say whether he gave you the impression of caring for me."

"If he hasn't conveyed that impression at first hand," he countered dryly, "it's a queer business."

Ann told herself that he had shot closer than he knew. "A woman can't hear those things too often," she asserted.

Justin would not be drawn. "He gave stronger proof than mere talk," he said. "He left out the dot."

She perceived that Rodoslav had indeed been convincing. "That doesn't surprise me," she returned.

"It surprised me. But he never mentioned it. I had to bring it up myself."

"To say what you thought of the system, I suppose?"

"I did have some steam to blow off," acknowledged Justin; "but he did not give me a chance. He not only didn't want a settlement; he said that if you happened to have any money of your own he'd much prefer to have you turn it over to a charity."

Ann smiled rather mirthlessly. "That didn't leave you much to say," she commented.

Justin laughed. "I told him he knew his job as a Prince, but that he would certainly go bankrupt as a business man. That led to a little talk about his property which I'm free to confess was an eye opener. I never made a worse size-up of a man in my life. Not a business man! Why, he's got the headpiece of a captain of finance. I told him he had no right to fight shy of public service. I said that any one who had done what he did in the way of reorganizing his estates could put a bankrupt country on its feet. He seemed rather pleased at that. He told me I'd given him something to think about."

Ann marveled at the turn of affairs which had led to such a talk and such advice. But this was not her chief concern. More moving than his words had been Justin's restraint. Not by a syllable had he intruded his sorrow that his plans for Oliver Page had gone wrong.

On the morrow Rodoslav brought his roses in person. "By way of showing myself completely vanquished," he explained. "I think most of Pau was on the Boulevard des Pyrenees."

Ann took the flowers soberly. "I think I'd rather you stopped giving them," she said.

"You don't like them?"

"For themselves, yes. I have a passion for roses."

"But not my roses?"

"They make me feel such a humbug," she confessed. "I shall feel a humbug whenever I'm near them. They won't let me forget."

He eyed her thoughtfully. "Have you always felt that way about them?"

"No, it was different before to-day. They were — well, amusing."

"And now they're accusing?" he suggested. "Very well. I'll discontinue them. But aren't you letting your conscience become a nuisance to you?"

Ann threw him a troubled glance across the flowers. "It hasn't been easy to face my family," she said. "If they disliked or misjudged you, it might be simpler; but I have no such consolation. They like you exceedingly. You made a conquest of my uncle."

"Your uncle made a conquest of me, for that matter. I should even like to tell him my plans."

"But you won't!" she exclaimed, taking alarm.

"No. If he were twenty years younger, I should risk it. As it is, he must wait till everybody knows. He will be the first to understand and approve my course."

"He will never understand mine," said Ann. "It is a mystery even to me."

Rodoslav drew one of the roses from its fellows and peered into its red heart as if he searched an omen. "If you were a Servian you would call it Destiny," he returned. "Why not?"

CHAPTER XIX

Destiny, if it was Destiny, seemed to thrust its inexorable hand into her life from that day forth. Thus, no ordinary thirst for gossip could to her mind account for the furor stirred up by the announcement of her engagement. She expected a local flurry. The exuberant felicitations of Virginia Truscott and the reproachful gaze of Price Buckley — who left Pau forthwith — were as easy of prediction as sunrise. She also anticipated a certain amount of Parisian comment, with a transatlantic echo wherein Rodoslav's name would be grotesquely misspelled and her private fortune grossly misstated. This was her utmost flight of conjecture. In the actual issue, she found herself an international sensation.

Rodoslav's rank, Justin Blair's money and political affiliations, and the memory of her own transit, a radiant débutante, across a Washington season, were the groundwork. The rest was chromatic journalism. They received their first warning New Year's of the giant mushroom that had sprung up in America. A reporter crossed France expressly to ask Justin if it was true that he had refused a Dukedom. Details more than ample reached them with the next bundle of New York papers. Read at haphazard, they presented a whirlwind of rubbish as sudden, as capricious, as inexplicable, as a flying cloud of dust. Rodoslav was by turns a Ouida hero and a brainless

degenerate; his ancestral home was both a barn and a castle straight out of medieval romance.

Ann was variously described as chic, statuesque, petite, blond, and brunette, a Juno and a Dresden shepherdess. There was gallant agreement as to her charm, brilliance, and cultivation, with the less chivalrous implication that she was throwing it all away on a foreigner. The match itself was roundly denounced as a mere vulgar act of barter. It was said to have roused the bitter hostility of the Pope on account of the difference in religion, and of the Austrian Emperor by reason of the disparity in rank. Both, however, had given a reluctant assent. The bride-to-be would foreswear the faith of her fathers and donate large sums to the church, while Franz Josef, in order to make her worthy of marriage with his subject, would on her wedding day confer upon her a title which was severally described as Baroness, Countess, Duchess, and Princess. The journal that held to the Duchess myth contrived to make the dignity retroactive and include Justin Blair, which proved that the young man who crossed France for an interview was not so irresponsible as he seemed.

So much for the news columns and editorials scanned at random. Traced back day by day, the riot of unreason was found to have its source in the speech of a member of Congress who, taking the earliest cable dispatch for a text, had belabored international matches in general and introduced a bill to tax all fortunes that left the country as marriage settlements.

"And all because I once blocked that whelp's nomination for Sheriff!" groaned Justin. He went

back to one or two of the wilder accounts and reread them with a wry face. "Pinheads!" he ejaculated. "How can they set up to judge a man of Rodoslav's caliber?" Gathering up the whole mass of misrepresentation, he thrust it savagely in the fire. "There's some of it he won't see," he declared.

There was little of it, however, that Rodoslav did not hear about. Virginia Truscott delayed her departure for Egypt by a fortnight for the sake of giving him bulletins.

"But I thought you wanted to get to Heliopolis ahead of the meet and practice," said her husband. "I thought you were going to fly over the Pyramids before anybody else had a chance?"

"I've given up the idea," she answered. "I'd rather miss the Egyptian meet altogether than leave dear Ann while the newspapers are behaving so abominably. I've had more experience with them than she has, poor girl! As a friend of them both, I've been able to correct many of the absurd stories that are flying about. The Prince said he would never forget my kindness."

Ann's gratitude was less outspoken, and the organs of publicity Virginia had such trouble in eluding presently announced that she had joined her palatial yacht, the *Don't Care*, for a Mediterranean cruise which would extend as far as Cairo.

Rodoslav would have known more than sufficient without Virginia's aid. The American echo had its European reëcho. The Old World expects and wants the extravagant from the New World, and the Continental press, knowing its readers, culled the wildest of the exotic growths for reproduction and comment.

But what he knew he kept to himself, and by his silence mounted to a higher plane in Justin Blair's respect.

The older man, indignant at what had occurred, lost no opportunity to attest publicly that he esteemed the Prince. He rode, golfed, played billiards in his company, followed his flights at the aërodrome, and finally, when in February they picked up the thread of their journey, invited him to fill the vacant seat in the automobile.

Rodoslav consulted Ann before deciding. "If you were counting on the trip for a respite, I'll decline," he offered.

"That's considerate of you," she said. "Does my acting show signs of overwork?"

"No. Why should it? I don't ask for emotional intensity. I imagine we are thought most matter-of-fact."

"Isn't that as well? You are a Prince."

He detected a spice of irony in her smile. "I am thinking of your family rather than the public," he explained. "They look at us strangely sometimes. We don't even use each other's first name before them."

Ann reflected a moment. "Use mine if you like," she said.

"Thank you, Ann," he returned promptly. "But it must be an exchange."

"Which?" she asked laughingly. "You have such a tremendous array. Alexandre, Constantin, Michael, Paul — I forget the rest."

"Then you have forgotten the one I care most about, the one most honored in the house of Nemanya,

the one under which, Fate willing, I shall unite my people. I mean Stephen," he ended.

His tone awed her. He already seemed Czar Stephen, speaking from his imperial throne.

"I'll not forget again," she promised.

"And you will use it?"

"Yes."

"Yes what, Ann?"

"Yes, Stephen," she answered, as if it were a rite.

"Your name was also known in the house of Nemanya," he added. "King Milutin had a daughter Anne. He married her to the son of a Tartar Prince whom he had made his vassal."

"And did she want to marry her Tartar?" she smiled.

Rodoslav shrugged. "I fancy they never inquired," he said. "The medieval Serbs had a high-handed way with their women. In fact, so have some of their descendants."

"Let's hope you'll institute reforms," observed Ann dryly.

He nodded his agreement. "You must help me there," he said. "Meanwhile, to prove how modern I am myself, I must ask you to decide whether I am to accept your uncle's invitation."

"Will it help?" she asked.

"Yes." He paused an instant. "The truth is," he added, "the time has come for me to set my face toward the East."

Ann's solemnity matched his own. The great adventure was near at hand! "Then it isn't for me to say no," she replied.

To herself she added that her time to help was short,

and that she would give him what he would of it. They would part in Italy, and he would go to lay his hand to his colossal task. He would belong to history. It must also be admitted that she looked without disfavor on a tour of the Riviera with her captive Prince. Few women could boast such a conquest. The newspaper clamor had annoyed her far less than any one supposed. Did not so portentous a splash argue a weighty cause? Cannes, Nice, Mentone, San Remo, Bordighera, the whole sparkling chain of pleasure cities, became in her mind's eye the brilliant audience of her triumphal progress.

Unfortunately for this bright vision, Justin Blair controlled their itinerary. He had had enough publicity, and their nightly stops were with one exception at unimportant little towns remarkable only for their views of the Mediterranean and their uniformly excellent cooking. The exception was Nice, where, late one afternoon, a puncture brought them to a standstill. Here again Destiny seemed to busy itself with Ann's affairs. Their accident befell in the palm-bordered Promenade des Anglais, opposite a bench which for a moment had the honor of supporting Baron Saccarello.

"This time it is your breakdown," he laughed, hobbling to the curb to shake hands. "Luckily you have not made such a thorough mess of it as I did. I'll not offer to rescue you with a carriage; but I will do you the kindness to warn you against my hotel." He made a gesture toward the great structure at his back. "It has a lift, telephones, central heating, a winter garden, all the modern inconveniences."

"Garage?" asked Justin, looking up from a disgusted diagnosis of the tire.

"And a garage. How could I have omitted it?" His glance traveled from Ann to Rodoslav and then back again to the girl. "May I offer my felicitations?" he said. "I can't deny I'm very much interested."

Ann added her most superlative smile to her acknowledgments. This was what a triumphal progress should be. Rodoslav contented himself with a formal bow.

Justin came round to Saccarello's side. "We'll join you," he said. "It will be too late for the Corniche road after that job is finished. You must take dinner with us."

Saccarello immediately assented. "You rescue me from boredom," he returned. "If I dine alone I don't consider that I have dined at all."

He helped Mrs. Blair alight, and would have given a hand to Ann had not Rodoslav anticipated him with the air of a jealous lover. Ann, taken by surprise, shrank a little from his solicitude; but a detaining pressure warned her to submit and entreated her to loiter. A forgotten purse served as an excuse to put a dozen paces between them and the others as they moved toward the entrance of the hotel.

"You must mind nothing I do while that old man is with us," he charged hurriedly. "He stands for Europe — the Europe we must outwit."

Not since she had known him had he shown such anxiety. He was a man facing a crisis.

"You want him to —"

"I want him to be convinced that I can think of

nothing but you. Don't fail me now! It is our great test."

"What must I do?"

"You must try to feel that you are not playing a part. Tell yourself it is not a make-believe, that you are truly betrothed to me, that you really love me. To-morrow it will be as before; but to-night, to-night only, do this for me. Say you won't fail me! Say you will help!"

Ann was swept off her feet by his pleading. "I'll do what I can," she promised.

It was Destiny, she told herself, half scoffing, half believing, as she made ready for whatever the evening might bring, and she threw upon that mysterious arbiter the choice of her gown. As the maid shook out the pretty array Ann bade her lay the dresses side by side on the counterpane, and turned away that she might not perceive their order.

"Are they all there?" she asked, her eyes still averted.

"Yes, Mademoiselle," said the girl. "The pink chiffon, the white satin, the Saxe blue —"

"Stop, stop!" laughed Ann. "You've spoiled everything."

"Have I, Mademoiselle?" The maid stared.

"Didn't you name them as they came?"

"Yes, Mademoiselle."

"Then rearrange them, please. It's a whim of mine. I want to choose at random."

The servant obeyed with a woman's unfailing interest in another woman's caprice. "They are ready," she announced, smiling.

"Then I'll take," Ann hesitated, searched the room

for a sign and, spying a numeral on the tag dangling from the door key, accepted its guidance, — "I'll take number three."

"It's the Saxe blue, Mademoiselle."

She faced about and satisfied her own eyes. Destiny must be in it. She had hit upon the gown that had won Saccarello's approval at their first encounter, the very one she had intuitively felt she should wear to-night.

Rodoslav was idly supporting rather less than his share of a conversation with the Italian as she came downstairs with Justin and her aunt; but her radiant apparition galvanized him to life and he hurried to meet her.

"Do your best," he murmured. "He suspects something." His tall form bent that he might miss nothing of her loveliness nor the well peopled hall lack assurance of his devotion, as he walked with her to Saccarello's side.

The old man once more took a deliberate survey of the shoulders that evoked such pleasant souvenirs of the second Empire, and then, in natural sequence, reaching Ann's gown, recalled a memory less ancient.

"That's right," he said. "Stick to the color of your eyes, as I told you in Paris."

"So you did," replied Ann, as if it had not entered her mind since. "I wonder if you also remember that it is the same gown ?"

"Yes," he assented, "and you wore the same turquoise pendant at your throat." Then, turning to Mrs. Blair, "You," he added, "wore pearl gray."

Justin's wonder found vent. "How in the world do you manage to remember such trifles ?" he demanded.

Saccarello's smile crept out in its feline way from the ambush of his great mustache. "I've got on in the world by remembering trifles," he said.

"Somewhat like a detective," suggested Rodoslav blandly.

"Somewhat," agreed Saccarello with equal suavity.

"Has remembering my gown helped you on in the world?" laughed Ann.

"Who knows, Signorina?" he rejoined, still smiling. "Who knows?"

She had a painful suspicion that the terrible old man not only knew she had treasured his praise at the opera, but set her down as an artful minx for pretending to have forgotten it. She was nervous under his strange scrutiny at table, and gave Rodoslav but lukewarm aid in his efforts to prove that they dwelt in a world apart. It was not that she was half-hearted. In point of fact, she had keyed herself to a resolve to do her utmost to help him circumvent this diabolical old creature who seemed to signify so much. But intentions would not serve. Saccarello's legend terrified her even more than the man himself. Only when the dinner reached its end did her fear lift and give way to acute regret. She felt as if she had lost Rodoslav his Empire.

CHAPTER XX

They passed for coffee into the winter garden, a dim, deserted, glass-domed place of palms, wicker furniture, and somnolence. Overheated for the sake of thin-clad women, it soon proved a purgatory to full-blooded Justin, who escaped, taking Saccarello with him. Rodoslav remained, biding his time for a word with Ann. He had not long to wait. The dinner, the day's journey, the devitalized air, and a hypnotic little fountain, joined forces to stupefy Mrs. Blair. After she had dozed twice, wrenched her neck, and, she suspected, compromised her dignity, she rose with a superhuman effort and declared that she must go to bed.

Alone with Rodoslav, Ann turned to him with a gesture of contrition. "I'm sorry," she said, "oh, so sorry!"

"I understood. He frightened you."

"He did frighten me. I'm a coward, I know; but I could not help it."

"It's his name."

"Not altogether." A shudder passed over the shoulders the Italian deemed so faultless. "He looks precisely what my aunt called him in Paris when I met him first — an old vulture. But I wasn't afraid of him then. I wasn't afraid of him in Italy. Now — it may be folly — but now I feel that he knows I'm shamming."

"He can't actually know; but he suspects. We must lull that suspicion somehow."

"How can we? I want to help you, — I realize how important it is, — but while I am near him —" She broke off with another shudder which told him that it defied rational defense.

"But if he were at a little distance?" asked Rodoslav after a moment's thought. "Would you feel the same?"

"Perhaps not. I cannot tell."

"Will you try an experiment?"

"Of course," she assented, eager to make amends for her failure. "If only I need not be so close to him, or say much —"

"You need not say anything. I simply want him to see us together."

"To see us together?" she repeated. "You mean —"

"I mean as if it were not a sham."

"O-oh!"

Her pursed lips made him smile. "Don't take alarm," he reassured. "It involves only the pose of a moment, a tableau vivant, no more, when Saccarello comes back."

"He may not return."

"Ah, yes, he will. He must satisfy himself about us. Trust me, he'll come, and come soon. You promised you would not mind to-night, remember."

"I'll keep my word," she answered; "but I don't want surprises. You must explain what you mean to do."

"I mean to give the impression that I am kissing you," he said. "Sit just as you are, with your head

half turned toward the door. As he comes down the corridor I will stoop over you." He illustrated. "So."

Ann slid to the opposite corner of the seat. "Must it be quite so — so near reality?" she asked, with a half laugh.

Rodoslav remained grave. "I can't keep farther away and have it seem real," he explained. "We mustn't forget that Saccarello is an excellent judge in such matters."

"Very well," Ann yielded. "Do as you think best."

"Thank you," he said, and for an interval they waited.

Then Ann started. "What if it is somebody else?" she questioned.

"I know Saccarello's gouty step too well to be mistaken."

"But Uncle Justin may come with him. If he does —"

"If he does, we'll have to find another opportunity."

"Thank you," she said in turn, and again they listened.

At last came the shambling footfall they awaited.

"Saccarello!" she breathed.

"And alone!"

With the word he caught her hand to his breast and bent over her with his lips all but touching hers. Ann, straining her ears, heard the pottering step come nearer, slacken, stop. Whereupon, as if it were her cue, dramatic intensity carried her over the last slight boundary and she met Rodoslav's lips with her own.

On the threshold there was stillness. After a moment, an eternity of a moment, came the sound of a discreet retreat down the corridor. But the arms that had locked her the instant her kiss proclaimed itself real still held her fast, Rodoslav's lips still pressed hers. Coming to herself, Ann thrust both hands against his breast and sprang to her feet with the wicker seat between them.

"You had no right!" she cried, her face aflame.

"No right?"

"It was unfair of you, detestable! You should have known why I did it."

Rodoslav stared at her strangely, and over his wonted pallor swept a flush which matched her own. "Was it only to help?" he asked haltingly.

Her pulses still in tumult, her thoughts a ferment of wonder, dismay, and self-inquisition, Ann caught at his words. "Was I not here to help?" she demanded. "Why else, pray, should I have done such a thing?"

His face became dull under her eyes. "Why else, to be sure," he replied, and turned away.

Ann veered, a lovely weathercock, between the temptation to stay and the instinct to fly. Temptation won.

"Are you satisfied?" she asked, her head high.

"Satisfied!" It was an echo with an inflection of its own.

"I have surely atoned for what I failed to do before. I have done what you asked — and more."

He faced her again. "It's true," he admitted broodingly.

"Can that terrible old man still be in doubt?"

Rodoslav seemed to drag the Italian from a far corner of his mind. "Was he there long, watching?" he asked.

"You know as much about it as I."

"I forgot time," he answered. "I forgot Saccarello."

She feigned vast impatience. "I should like at least to feel that we succeeded," she said, turning to go. "Otherwise —"

"Otherwise?" he prompted, again at her side.

"Don't come back with me," she forbade. "I wish to go alone. I have earned a rest."

"As you will." He halted by the door to let her pass. "Have I offended you beyond pardon? Is there nothing I can do to make amends?"

"You might at least say you think we succeeded in deceiving Saccarello."

"Why not?" he said. "You deceived me."

She went down the corridor feeling as if she had shorn a Samson. She had not needed his final admission to insure her triumph. His embrace had told her that he loved her. She stood in his thoughts beside his great ambition. In the moment of their kiss she had even transcended that ambition. Had he not, by his own confession, forgotten time, forgotten the grim watcher who stood for Europe? He could lord it over her no more! He was her vassal!

Issuing into the lobby, the first person upon whom her victorious glance fell was Saccarello. Hunched on the arm of a chair, one leg drawn back beneath his body, his chin propped in his clawlike hand, his lids drooping, a vulture on its lookout, there, commanding the door, he perched.

At her coming he straightened.

"I am the sole chaperon on the scene," he said. "Your aunt has gone to bed. Your uncle has thought of a business letter and is swearing at the pens in the writing room. I alone am vigilant."

At first she meant to say that she would not tax his strength further and then bid him good night; but his last word changed her mind. She did not feel as afraid as she had at dinner. The kiss had oddly fortified her courage.

"Do I seem to require vigilance?" she asked.

His shrug evaded a direct reply. "You of course think our Old World conventions stupid," he said. "Still," he shrugged again, "they exist, they are facts."

"And can't be ignored?"

"Not with impunity."

Ann conceived and risked a bold play. "Don't imagine I'm quite a barbarian," she begged prettily. "I knew I shouldn't be sitting alone with Prince Rodoslav in the winter garden. Bear witness that I have run away."

"I will, if you need a witness," he replied; "but I don't feel that the case is urgent. What has become of Rodoslav?"

"He's still there." She gave a backward tilt of her admirable head and smiled. "Princes are very much like other men, aren't they?"

"All I've known were human."

"Mine is certainly human." Her smile became a laugh. "He would much rather I stayed in the winter garden. In fact, I think he cares less about the conventions than I do." She fixed her eyes upon Saccarello's with appealing candor. "Tell me," she

besought. "You know him better than I. Does he sulk?"

Saccarello bore her regard with composure. "What kind of friend would I be to tell you?" he rejoined.

"A good friend, I think. If it's a habit, it ought to be cured."

"I learned early in life not to tell people their faults," said the old man grimly. "You must use your own eyes."

"It wouldn't be quite the same as telling me my faults," she discriminated; "that is, not yet. I suppose marriage alters one's point of view."

"So I've heard."

"You've never married, then? Haven't you wanted to marry?"

"No," he said shortly to both questions, and eschewed further autobiography. "Is your wedding day fixed?"

"Not yet."

"It will be soon, perhaps?"

"It would be soon if the Prince had his way," she parried, without deviating from probability.

"Am I to infer that he isn't having his own way?"

Ann again dodged skillfully. "I shouldn't infer that, if I were you," she smiled. "He has very great powers of persuasion." She laid her finger tips together across her breast and swept him an ironical bow. "Isn't it evident?"

The heavy eyelids lifted and the black eyes pierced hers with a directness that brought back all her apprehension. "Yes, Signorina, it is evident," he assented, each word as deliberate as a hammer stroke. "He must indeed have very great powers of persua-

sion to have induced you to cast your lot with his."

He suspected! He must suspect! A look here, an inflection there, and now this speech challenged her sincerity! Was the ruse of the winter garden after all a futility? She could divine little of what Saccarello knew; but she did overwhelmingly realize that he was an antagonist and that Rodoslav's success or ruin might well hang upon her bearing in this very hour. But what an unequal duel! What a supreme need for coolness and courage!

"It was a siege," she asserted lightly; "but I was compelled to surrender in the end."

"Compelled, Signorina?"

"Yes." She still flaunted the smile that so belied her anxiety.

"What compelled you?"

"Need you ask? What makes women in general surrender?"

"Many reasons, — ambition, pique, money, sheer folly. One might extend the list."

"Indeed one might," she retorted. "You have omitted love."

"I made sure you would supply the omission."

"In that case you must have guessed my reason."

"No, Signorina, merely your answer. Your reason is still a profound feminine mystery."

Ann shrugged her shoulders in quite the Italian's own manner. "You are trying to tease me," she said. "I can't believe that my real feelings are hard to read. Prince Rodoslav, certainly, is in no doubt about them. After all, he's the one mainly concerned, isn't he?"

"To all appearances," answered Saccarello.

Ann wondered what he meant by that; but he contented himself with watching her from beneath his lids. It was a terrifying scrutiny to support. She caught at the first conversational straw that offered.

"What does bother me a little about him," she avowed, as if turning from jest to earnest, "is the fact that he belongs to another race. Sometimes I feel as if he had stepped off another planet. It makes the future tremendously interesting, of course, but I can't help wishing I were a little wiser. You could help me if you would; but I fear you won't."

"Why?"

"Because of what you just said about pointing out faults. But I don't really want to know Prince Rodoslav's faults. They'll crop out by themselves, like my own."

"Doubtless." Saccarello grinned under his great mustache. "Is it his merits, then? You must surely have discovered those for yourself."

"Indeed I have!" declared Ann ardently. "But this is something I can't see for myself; but which, if I am to be his wife, I ought to know more about. I mean the race back of the man."

Saccarello shot a query of Latin bluntness. "Do you want to know what sort of parentage you'll be giving your children?" he asked.

Ann wanted to know nothing of the kind, as her rising color eloquently testified; but she saw in a flash not only that a retreat might mean disaster, but that a valiant advance might win the battle.

"Yes," she avowed heroically, "I do."

The old man studied her with a different expression. His face seemed more human. "You have asked me something I will not refuse," he said with deference; "but I shall choose my own time to answer."

"Your own time?"

"I have the feeling, Signorina, that your engagement will not end in marriage."

"How can you?" she protested.

He spread his thin hands. "It is not possible to explain everything. Call it an intuition, a premonition, what you will. Whatever it is," he reverted to his old phrase, "it exists, and while it exists I will say nothing."

It was therefore a drawn battle, not a decisive victory, to which Justin Blair's return brought a truce.

CHAPTER XXI

SACCARELLO saw them off for Italy. When Ann came out into the blue and gold splendor of the morning to take her place in the car, she spied him limping slowly up and down under the trees with Rodoslav. They talked idly, like men who find nothing more profound than the weather or brands of tobacco to discuss, and, on perceiving her, Rodoslav flung away his cigarette and hastened toward her as if the sun had risen only at her coming. By this maneuver he gained an advance of a rod or more upon Saccarello.

"The fiend is unconvinced," he warned as he bent over her hand.

Ann silently slipped her arm into his and moved by his side upon the common foe. "Good-by, Baron," she said, extending her free hand, "or rather, au revoir. One always does see you again."

The Italian took her fingers in his thin claw and eyed her with peculiar earnestness. "I should be sorry to think it good-by," he returned slowly. "We have still many things to say to each other, I am sure."

Justin, coming up with his wife, overheard. "What do you two talk about?" he laughed.

Saccarello, still holding Ann's hand, half turned. "We have a surprising range," he said, "Ethnology, gowns, opera, statecraft," his eyes came back to Rodoslav, "the ways of Princes."

Justin laughed again. "I must sit in at your next parley," he said. "Let's hope it may be in Venice."

A too studied carelessness in her uncle's tone made Ann suspect that stronger grounds than hope underlay his reference to Venice. She believed that a meeting had been already arranged. She even wondered if the Nice encounter was as accidental as it had seemed.

"I don't visit Venice so often as I did," returned Saccarello, as if he read her thoughts. "Will you be there long?"

"Till the weather grows too warm."

"And after that?"

"Vienna, perhaps." It was Ann who answered.

"Eh?" said Justin.

Ann withdrew her hand from Saccarello's and, linking it to its mate on Rodoslav's sleeve, faced them with a half jesting, half tender air of proprietorship. "Vienna or our estates in Hungary," she said; "whichever my husband prefers."

It was a valiant stroke; but she was far from satisfied with its effect. Saccarello's regard was not for herself or Rodoslav, but for her Aunt Helen, whose amazed "Ann!" betrayed her complete ignorance of these plans. When his glance came back to Ann it twinkled with an amusement she thought diabolical.

"In that case, Signorina," he said, "we would have to forego one of our topics. The ways of Princes would be taboo. Let us hope for an earlier reunion."

This was his final word which Ann bore with her over the Corniche road into Italy. To the casual listener it meant little; but to her it seemed at once a

“Vienna or our estates in Hungary,” she said.

prophecy and a warning. How much had the imperfectly blinded eyes of Europe seen? What could she do to render Rodoslav's immunity complete? That she put herself first, typified the change that had come over her attitude since yesterday. From the rôle of conqueror she had passed to that of protector. She had done battle for him, she had made sacrifices for his sake! He had become that possession so absorbing to a woman, a being she must defend!

Rodoslav was all unconscious of the transformation. He sat with his eyes on the changing pageant of shore and sea, his thoughts a mystery. Not till they were over the border did they find a word apart. After luncheon at a high perched inn, he followed her out into a tiled loggia where she stood with her preoccupied gaze upon the Mediterranean frothing against the rocks below.

"I am very grateful," he said.

Ann turned with a gesture of anxiety. "I did all I could; but —" She sighed her doubt of its efficacy.

"I am very grateful," he repeated. "Whatever comes, I should like you to feel that."

"Whatever comes!" She missed the high confidence of his old manner. "You are not discouraged?"

"No; but I realize that you have done all you could, or can. I must stand alone henceforth."

She experienced an illogical qualm of disappointment. Had her rebuff in the winter garden done this? Was their alliance really at an end? Did she wish it to end thus? Nothing in her life had

brought the zest of this game of hoodwinking Europe. What could the future bring her now to fill its place?

"If the make-believe will still help, I won't refuse to go on with it," she said. "I don't think Saccarello is past convincing. I had another talk with him last night, and I kept my wits about me. By myself, I was no longer afraid."

"He mentioned it," said Rodoslav.

Ann caught her breath. Was it possible the Italian could have gone into details? "He mentioned it! Do you mean while you walked together this morning?"

"Yes. He told me I had picked out a clever woman to fall in love with."

"Was that all?"

"No." His eyes were on the sea, not her.

"What else?" she pressed, her voice unsteady.

"He added that I too was more clever than he supposed me."

"How so?"

"In preserving your respect so long."

Ann's eyes flashed. "You have preserved it by telling me the truth," she rejoined. "But you could not say that to him."

"No," he assented, "I could not say that. In fact, I couldn't say anything. You joined us then."

"Was it that which made you tell me he was still unconvinced?"

"Yes. He sees that you are too intelligent to be fooled about my past, and, on the other hand, he isn't sure that you are sufficiently in love with me to overlook it. His only choice is to believe that you

mean to marry me for my position and perhaps my future."

"If he believes I mean to marry you, that's enough," said Ann, distinguishing the vital point. "If we can make people think that until you are ready to act, they may say what they like of my motives afterward. Will it matter what anybody thinks after you leave Venice?"

"Matter! With a revolution in Greece waiting only a torch to fire it! With Turkey and Bulgaria already at each other's throat! With the Servians everywhere on tiptoe for a crisis! Alas! It will matter! From the hour you and I part company I shall run the risk of the old espionage. They will say, those guardians of mine, 'See! He is off with his romance! He is at politics again! The firebrand is abroad! Look out!'"

Ann's blood tingled at his words. She, Ann Milburn, had meant a respite from this surveillance. While these enemies thought him a mere idler at her side, he had forged his thunderbolt. But was her work now ended? Must she withdraw just as the drama approached its climax, when she might cover his advance, when History might become her grateful debtor?

"Must you act soon?" she asked.

"Have you seen a newspaper to-day?"

"No."

"There has been fighting on the Turco-Bulgarian border. It may not yet be time for me to act; but I must at least be near at hand."

"That means —"

"It means my villa near Regusa at present."

"Regusa!" she said. "I did not know you had a place there."

"Did you suppose I live on my ancestral rock in the Herzegovina when I'm south? The villa is rather more habitable. From that base I can watch events and strike inland where I like."

She needed no key to those last laconic words. The great adventure was indeed near! Venice would write finis to the story which began for her before the tapestry in the Rheims cathedral. She realized it with acute regret.

"Oh, I wish I could do more!" she exclaimed fervently.

He swung round at her tone, and, seeing her eyes suffused, sprang to her side and imprisoned her hands in his. "You can if you will!" he cried eagerly. "Make the pretense real, my ally! Come with me to the end! Meet the danger with me like the brave spirit you are! Share all with me, — the risk, the struggle, the prize! What modern woman has had such a chance offered her? You can be the Jeanne d'Arc of my country! I see the meaning of our first meeting now! You were born to inspire my people as she was born to inspire France! They will hail you as France hailed her! They will fight like demons because you lead, win against any odds, deny you no reward! Is it nothing to unite a nation scattered and oppressed for centuries? Is it nothing to go down to posterity in legend and song? Don't hesitate. This is what you were meant to do since Time began! Embrace your destiny!"

There was a spell in his words; but she shook it off.

"It is your destiny, you see, not mine," she answered, withdrawing her hands. "You will need no one but yourself to rouse your people. Speak to them as you have spoken to me, and they will follow."

"But you do not follow," he said. "If I cannot persuade you, I shall fail with them."

"No, no!"

"It is true. You are bound up with my fortunes. You have become as dear to me as the great dream itself. You must have seen that last night. I forgot that old man in the doorway. I forgot everything but you. I believed you had given me your lips because you loved me. I even hope it still."

"You must not."

"I cannot help it. I have loved no human being as I love you. I cannot picture a future you do not share. If we separate at Venice, we shall surely meet again. I may never have your love; but I see you near me to the end!"

His words haunted her. Whether they followed the prismatic shore, climbed the mountain barrier of Liguria, or sped in their last flight across the Lombard plain, she repeatedly asked herself if it were possible that Venice would not mark the end? She had spoken the exact truth when she denied that she loved him; but in her heart of hearts lay a dumb regret that it must be the truth. With all his faults, he was still a man to love if love came by willing. He stood, as he had from the first, for Romance, and, because the world she had known was prosaic, Romance spoke to her with a silver tongue.

The man himself said no more. He had made his avowal. Whether for good or ill, Destiny must decide. From the hour they left the Mediterranean behind till they exchanged the automobile for the train at Mestre, he was apparently a man without a care. No motoring companion could be more entertaining, more considerate, more gay. As they crossed the lagoon, however, and Venice performed its old, old miracle of rising from the sea, Ann saw his face sadden, and she divined that his vision of the future grew less assured.

It was evening as they issued from the station and crossed to the black fleet of gondolas moored by the marble steps. Justin had seen to that. Matter-of-fact in most things, he was a man of sentiment as regards Venice, and would approach her only at the close of day.

"The Grand Canal all the way to the hotel, tell the man, Ann," he charged. "I don't come to Venice for short cuts. All my American hustle is back on the mainland with the automobile."

So it was they floated toward the golden heart of the city, following every leisured turn of the street of streets. "Palazzo Pesaro! Marcello! Ca' D'Oro! Palazzo Michiele delle Colonne!" The gondolier intoned them one by one like a chant. Then, round the curve rose the unmistakable arch of the Rialto, gateway of the splendid aisle that boasts the Loredan, the Grimani, and the Mocenigo among its glories, and closes its vista with the sumptuous Foscari. Then, sweeping the noble turn, they faced the final pageant of palaces and the more distant domes and bell towers of Santa Maria della Salute,

keeping watch upon the city's gorgeous portal. Far beyond, against the green background of the public garden, drifted one of the idle red sails that seem to have no other function than to add a last, almost superfluous, note of the picturesque. In the nearer lagoon, moored between the Ducal Palace and San Giorgio over the way, lay an Italian cruiser, a German tourist steamer, and two private yachts. From the taffrail of the smarter pleasure craft trailed the Stars and Stripes.

"Americans!" said Mrs. Blair, loitering with speculative gaze on the landing stage of their hotel. "I wonder if we know them?"

Her husband withdrew a no less interested eye from the warship, marked the yacht's outlines, and broke into a great laugh. "Fate is surely in it!" he declared. "Can't you guess who they are?"

"Not the Truscotts!"

"Nobody else. I'd know the *Don't Care* in the dark."

"But they're in Egypt for the Heliopolis aviation meeting."

"That ended last week. They've had just time to steam comfortably across and join us. I tell you it's Fate!"

Ann stole a curious glance at Rodoslav. To the others he seemed merely struck by the coincidence which gave a new lease of life to the well-worn family joke; but she read a far different meaning in the look he bent upon the Truscotts' yacht. To him it was indeed the instrument of Fate!

CHAPTER XXII

They encountered the Truscotts the same evening at Florian's. The café had an odd air of desertion. The night was too sharp to draw any one to the tables under the arcades, and even the indoor gathering was small. A handful of Venetians played checkers or read eye-straining newspapers in one corner; a contingent from the tourist steamer drank bock in another. Midway between, disdaining the Germans and trying to look as much at home as the Venetians, sat Virginia and her husband.

"Heaven be praised!" she exclaimed, cutting short a yawn. "In another minute I should have gone back to the yacht. If I ever come to Venice again out of season, I hope somebody will pitch me in the Grand Canal."

"Why did you come?" Mrs. Blair voiced the family curiosity.

The query touched a sensitive spring in the stockbroker's mechanism. "Because we're crazy," he declared. "The travel bug has bitten us. We can't stop. We'll gad till we die — if we do die. Perhaps we won't be lucky enough to die. Perhaps we'll go on gadding forever, like that Jew they tell about. He ought to have married Virginia, that chap. They would have made a good team."

His wife laid her hand on his sleeve, and he subsided into a rumble. "The poor dear has a cold in his head and rheumatism in his feet," she explained.

"When we put in at Ancona, I wanted him to see the town; but he preferred to stand on a damp pier and fish, so naturally —"

"I was all right at Ancona," contradicted her husband. "Those beastly tombs in Ravenna did me up."

"What nonsense! Dante's and Theodoric's tombs were as dry as — as —"

"As I am," said Justin tactfully. "What's everybody going to drink?"

Virginia sought Ann's sympathy. "I don't know what has come over the man," she confided. "Everything palls on him now. If he gets any worse, I shall have to take him back to New York and set him to work."

Seeing the broker absorbed in ordering his favorite beverage, Mrs. Blair recurred to her original question. "You haven't told us what brought you to Venice," she reminded.

"We're here," explained Virginia in discreet tones, "because, with all our globe trotting, we have never cruised along the shore of the Adriatic. Why we've skipped it, I can't say; but it's a fact, and when we left Alexandria I made up my mind that I wouldn't have it on my conscience any longer."

Rodoslav left the men to discuss the recent vagaries of Wall Street and dropped into a seat at her side.

"Have you seen only the western shore?" he asked.

"That's all so far."

"Then the best is still before you. You won't be sorry you made the trip."

"I wish you'd tell that to my husband," she re-

joined. "He seems to think Dalmatia is full of savages. Why, he thought Montenegro was some kind of a darky colony till Price Buckley was appointed Minister and he had the curiosity to read it up."

"Price Buckley!"

"A Minister!"

"Who next?"

Thus Ann, Mrs. Blair, and Justin hailed the news of the plump diplomat's promotion.

"Do you mean to say you haven't read about his appointment?" demanded Virginia. "Why, it happened just after he left Pau. But I suppose you got so you didn't want a newspaper in the room. Yes, he is a plenipotentiary now. Montenegro used to be lumped in with Greece and Bulgaria, I believe, with one Minister for the three; but now it has its own, and Price is it. What in the world Montenegro wants of a United States Minister all to its cute little self I can't conceive. Perhaps it doesn't, and somebody in Washington has simply made a berth for Price. He was crazy to get into the Balkans somewhere, and I dare say that, with one uncle in the Cabinet, another in the Senate, and a third in the steel trust, it wasn't hard to manage. For myself, I think I'd rather play second, or even third, fiddle in London or Paris than be the whole orchestra in an out-of-the-way spot like Cettinje. But dear old Price was certainly delighted when he wrote. I heard from him as he was leaving Paris and again after he reached Montenegro, and pride fairly oozed out from under the flaps of the envelopes. He must be rather lonely, though, and I mean to

pay him a call. Cettinje is practically next door to Regusa, isn't it?"

"Geographically speaking," smiled Rodoslav.

"Does that mean it's a thumping long way in reality?" put in the broker hopefully.

"You would find Cattaro the best point to strike inland. It's only forty kilometers or so over the mountains. From Regusa it's perhaps a hundred and twenty. I've often motored it." He hesitated a moment and then added, "I have a motor at Regusa now, which is at your disposal if you would care to make the run. If you don't reach Regusa before me, I should also be happy to have you pay me a visit at my place there. Indeed," he turned to the others, "it would give me the keenest pleasure to welcome you all. The villa is large enough to make every one comfortable, and I think I could show you a few things you might otherwise miss."

The stockbroker murmured his astonished thanks and left the decision to his wife, who proved equal to her miraculous opportunity. Guest of a Prince in his own villa! What a feather in her cap! Reach Regusa before him? Not if she preserved her senses!

"A house party in Dalmatia!" she exclaimed. "How perfectly ideal! But we must have a yachting party first. You must all be our guests for the cruise down."

Ann, perceiving Destiny at work, held her breath. There was a pause which Rodoslav broke.

"As for me," he said, "I accept gladly. You will save me a tedious roundabout journey by way of Trieste."

"Splendid!" cried Virginia, and faced the others. "Surely I can depend on all of you?"

Justin shook his head. "It's kind of you both," he said; "but you must count me out. I am obliged to stick to Venice for a time."

"I'm so sorry. Some tiresome business, I suppose?"

"Yes, business," he assented. "I am to meet a man here."

Virginia was not heartbroken at his defection; but she did want the future Princess. "Would you mind if I carried off your wife and Ann?" she asked. "It would not be for long."

His lips said "no," but his manner conveyed another impression to his helpmate, who promptly improvised excuses why she could not accept. Reduced to their last analysis, these were two. Yachting often made her seasick, and her husband, left to himself, could not be trusted to stick consistently to winter underwear.

"I can't see that those reasons apply to Ann," laughed Mrs. Truscott. "Do let her come, at least! It's such a fine chance for her to see one of her future homes! Own that you are dying to do it!" she appealed to the girl herself.

Ann felt Rodoslav's eyes entreating her; but she would not face him, nor would she commit herself. If it was to be, it would be. She would yield to Destiny; but she would not go to meet it. Her answer was a smile which told no tales.

Virginia again directed her batteries upon Justin. "I'll be a perfect dragon of a chaperon," she cajoled, slipping into a seat beside him and peering into his

face with an intensity that diverted the German tourists opposite. "And I'll see her safely back to Venice. She is only waiting for a little encouragement from you to say yes. Is there any good reason why she shouldn't go?"

"None in the world," said Justin, not relishing his position and extricating himself promptly. "If I could, I would accept myself."

Virginia beamed. "I'll talk to Ann," she said, and relieved him of her attentions.

Rodoslav kept watch upon their conference; but Ann still refused to face him and still shirked the decision that Justin's final word had left to her. Suspecting a lovers' quarrel, Virginia finally left off her persuasions, bidding her sleep on the suggestion and give her answer to-morrow.

Matters were at this pass when they parted company in the piazzetta, the Truscotts hailing a gondola, the others sauntering back to the hotel with repeated stops before the glittering windows of the arcades and the Salizzada San Moisè.

Ann linked her arm within her aunt's and detained her before a jeweler's display till the men strolled beyond earshot. "Would you go, Aunt Helen?" she asked, still hoping that she need not personally decide. "Put yourself in my place."

"I can't do that, my dear."

"Well, then, decide for me."

"I cannot do that, either. You must know whether you do or don't want to go."

"Is that all I need consider?"

"I don't know of anything else. You heard what your uncle said."

"He had to say something to get rid of Virginia cooing into his face."

"You needn't be afraid that he said more than he meant. He doesn't let politeness carry him that far. As for Virginia Truscott, she is often silly and sometimes loud; but I never saw any great harm in her. It was nice of her to ask us and it really is a good chance, as she said, — though I wish she hadn't, — for you to see a place where you may live. I should like to go myself on that account."

"Do come!" begged Ann, with eagerness that threw light on her real wishes. "I know you weren't altogether serious about the seasickness and the flannels."

The elder woman smiled. "I am altogether serious about wanting to stay with Justin," she replied. "We shan't have many years together, and I begrudge every day we spend apart. You'll understand by and by, if you don't now. But possibly you do understand now, and for that very reason don't wish to miss the cruise?"

Ann dodged that question. "Perhaps Uncle Justin will finish business in time to bring you along," she said hopefully. "Is it something important? I haven't heard him mention it before."

"It concerns Oliver."

"Oh," said Ann, and moved on out of the glare of the shop window.

"Justin had word from him to-night," continued her aunt, speaking with the constraint that had marked even the most casual references to Page since Ann's engagement. "He's coming back by way of Vienna."

"And Venice?"

"Yes, of course. It is directly on his way to the plant."

"Is he coming soon?" Try as she would, she could not make the query careless.

"I think so; but I am not sure. Justin is very eager to see him. He will not dream of stirring from Venice till he comes."

Ann's heart leaped. He was coming! Any day he might come! And then her brain inquired what in the world did it matter to Ann Milburn whether he came or not? But the heart is a foolish organ. It continued excitable. Not even the most stern reminders that Page had had his chance and forfeited it, that he was as nothing in her thoughts, a very Ishmael, could bring it to complete tranquillity. Though he was an outcast, argued the foolish organ, would it not still be sweet to teach him the value of the prize he had flung away? Viewed thus, his return was worth Ann Milburn's consideration. She owed it to her pride to confront him, to let him see how little he counted, to prove to him — perhaps — how much she signified to some one else.

This under the arcades. As they came out into the Salizzada San Moisè the immediate present became absorbing. Justin had entered a tobacconist's, Rodoslav remaining at the door to intercept them. Something in a printshop opposite caught Mrs. Blair's eye as they joined him, and she crossed to it without warning, leaving Ann to an encounter she would willingly have postponed.

Rodoslav wasted no time in seizing his oppor-

tunity; but he did not press her for a decision. His words took a form more startling.

"Stand by me here," he charged, bending close. "Walk by me all the way. Take my arm."

Ann obeyed without question and, pretending absorption in a bead seller's window, chattered whatever nonsense came to mind. Presently he stopped her.

"He has gone on," he said more quietly; "but stay by me."

"Who is it?" she questioned fearfully.

"A spy."

"A spy!" she repeated. "Already?"

"Yes, already," he said. "Even before you leave me, they have begun."

Justin issued from the tobacconist's, and they moved on together toward the hotel, Ann's thoughts running feverishly upon the sinister incident that had just transpired. She was all impatience to speak apart with Rodoslav. She must discuss this terrifying development with him. She could not sleep until she knew its full significance. But, to her astonishment, they were no sooner indoor than he bade them an abrupt good night and, crossing the lobby, disappeared in the direction of the landing stage on the Grand Canal.

At the outset she was puzzled and half offended. Then, taking thought, she admired him for his delicacy. He had seen at Florian's that she was of two minds, he knew that the happening in the street would carry weight; but not by another word or look of his own would he importune her help. Mounting to her room, she switched on the elec-

tricity only long enough to unbar a shutter. Then, the room behind in darkness, she stepped out upon the little gothic balcony and peered down over its balustrade. Rodoslav stood halfway down the marble steps, his gaze fixed upon the yellow line of lights under the walls of San Giorgio which marked the cabins of the *Don't Care*. Presently another craft distracted him. Round the jutting piles beneath Ann's balcony stole a black prow, questing for traffic, and, as if the gondolier's solicitation chimed with a new-found purpose of his own, Rodoslav stepped aboard and was noiselessly borne away toward the yacht that had so opportunely become a factor in his plans.

Ann followed the gondola till it became a dark spot against the grayish white hull of the Truscott yacht and hung there waiting. What did this late call of his portend? Had to-night's discovery put another face upon his affairs? Did he intend to abandon the cruise? Surely that was too convenient a cloak for his advance to give up. Perhaps he had gone to hasten the Truscotts' departure. He may have had fresh news from the Balkans. The newspaper readers in Florian's had seemed specially absorbed in something. Could the sporadic fighting on the Bulgarian frontier have became actual war? Keeping watch at her window, she asked herself question upon question which she could not answer. Then, as the black spot against the yacht at last detached itself and glided forth on its silent return, she lingered only to assure herself that the hotel was its destination, and, letting herself out of her room, betook herself to an alcove on the floor below where

she had noticed writing materials. Seated here, with a few scribbled lines before her, she awaited Rodoslav's coming.

It was not long before she heard his step ascend the stair and turn down the corridor toward his room; but she did not wish him to think she sought a meeting, and drove her pen unceasingly. Even when he halted by his own door and for a long moment stood looking in at her, she did not glance up.

"You write late," he said.

Ann gave a realistic start. "Oh, it's you!" she returned. "Is it really late?"

"Nearly twelve." He fitted his key in the lock and turned it. "Good night again," he said, and would have entered.

Strategy became imperative. "Oh!" cried Ann once more; but now with a note of fear which she further emphasized by springing to her feet.

Rodoslav was instantly in the alcove. "What is it? What startled you?"

She covered her pretty ears with her hands and prodded her invention. "Don't you see anything?" she quavered.

He jerked back the heavy hangings of a window, peered under the desk and chairs, and cast a glance into the shadowy corners. "Not a thing," he declared.

Ann drew a breath of relief. "Perhaps it was my imagination, after all," she said.

"What do you think you saw?"

Ann took a final shuddering survey of the cornice. "I'm a fearful coward about bats," she alleged, resorting to a general statement. "A girl I know once

got one in her hair. I don't think I could be much more afraid of a vampire. I'm sorry to make a commotion over nothing; but it wasn't a thing I could help. I suppose you thought it was another spy."

"No," he responded.

"It would have been natural."

"I did not think it, however," he answered, obviously loath to dwell on the topic.

"Not after what happened to-night?" she said, determined not to let her hard-won chance slip. "I should think it would have been your first suspicion. What was that man like?"

"You would be seeing him everywhere in everybody if I told you."

"I shall see him everywhere as it is."

"Don't take it so seriously."

"I can't help it. It gave me a shock to know that I have been watched by a secret agent. Was he in Florian's?"

"I did not notice him there."

"Was he waiting under the arcades?"

"What does it matter? You must not let this thing prey on your mind. I am sorry I spoke about it. The man may not be here to watch me. It has been months since I saw him last. Perhaps I have ceased to interest him."

Ann faced him silently for a moment. "You are trying to spare me," she said. "You don't wish to influence me about Regusa."

"I don't want what I said in the street to influence you. I spoke hastily. I gave the incident more weight than it deserved."

"It is your chivalry that makes you tell me this,"

she asserted, wrought to an exalted mood. "How can you be mistaken, you who have been spied upon before? No, I am not that dull. In your heart you feel that if I go to Regusa you can outwit every one. Yet you will not ask me to go."

He pondered her words an instant. "No," he replied, "I will not ask you to go."

Ann put out her hand. "You need not," she said. "When do we start?"

The red leaped to his face, and he bent over her hand and kissed it. "I can't fail now!" he exclaimed. "You make success a certainty."

It was a splendid moment for Ann. She felt as if she had done something epic. History had surely hung breathless on her decision. But such moments are as brief as they are rare. The jealous realities ever tread close.

"Can you start to-morrow?" he asked.

"To-morrow!"

"I have had another talk with the Truscotts, and they are willing to leave at once. They wish to put in at one or two places before Regusa. That means delay for me, of course; but on the other hand it carries out the impression of a cruise for pleasure."

"To-morrow, then," she promised.

A neighboring campanile freed a tinkling little chime and then solemnly struck midnight. They waited for it to end, smiling into each other's eyes.

"Not to-morrow," said Rodoslav; "to-day!"

CHAPTER XXIII

But she was not yet quits with Venice. A significant interval still lay between her and departure, — time for sleep, time for awakening and reaction, time for a meeting as sudden, as unexpected, as last night's revelation of espionage.

Early astir, she elected to have her coffee in the breakfast room of the hotel, which she recalled as a place of warmth, flowers, and morning sun. Descending, she found the spot all she had remembered and, for the moment, exclusively her own. Choosing a table with an outlook upon the canal, she broke her roll and began to submit the night's happenings to daylight scrutiny. Its brasswork and white paint a-glitter, the *Don't Care* over the way made her promise to Rodoslav seem very real, very binding, very problematic. Was it merely to an excursion to Regusa she had assented? What inch had he persuaded her to grant that had not involved its ell? Into what uncharted sea might not that aptly named vessel bear her?

Because her eyes were upon the Truscott yacht she disregarded a gondola, carrying a traveler and his luggage, that shot beneath her window to the landing stage. Because the eyes of the traveler were upon the cruiser which dwarfed the *Don't Care* to a toy, he missed Ann pensive at her window. Her first intimation that Oliver Page had arrived from

Russia was conveyed by his own voice from the threshold of the breakfast room.

"Yes," he was saying, "I'll have it in here. Leave out the chicory and be sure it's hot. At the same time — I'm hungry enough for two men — you might bring me — Ann!"

The fantastic turn surprise gave his sentence relieved the encounter of embarrassment.

"I decline to be eaten," she laughed. "Has Russia made you a cannibal?"

"Almost," he answered, recovering himself and, crossing the room, possessed himself of her hands. "No, you haven't changed," he said, scanning her face. "You look just as you did."

"Why not? It has been but a little while since you saw me."

"It has seemed years," he declared.

Ann groped uncertainly for her vanished grudge. She had not thought to greet the man who had humbled her on these pacific terms. She had not expected to be glad, spontaneously glad, to see him. Above all, she had not looked to have him ignore the fact that they had last parted company in a saffron afterglow above the roofs of Pau. Could he see no affront in his silence? He seemed oblivious, even unaware, of the enormity he had committed. How could she sufficiently requite such audacity?

She began by offering to share her coffee.

"On condition that you take half of mine when it comes," he stipulated, and dropping into a seat, faced her across the narrow barrier of the tray.

"Two lumps, isn't it?" asked Ann the inexorable.

"You still remember!"

He laid his brown work-scarred hand over her white one.

Decidedly his punishment must begin! "I remember many things," she said pointedly.

Page brushed aside the untasted cup and leaned eagerly forward, searching her eyes. "I hope you mean your letter," he replied, his voice vibrant with feeling. "Heaven bless you for writing it! Heaven forgive me for the harsh things I thought till it reached me! I did not know you until you spoke to me in that letter. I did not realize what a true woman you were beneath your tantalizing ways, your girlish caprice. Was I blind to misunderstand you so?" He laid his brown, work-scarred hand over her white one. "But I loved you, Ann. Even though I misunderstood you, I loved you. Surely you've seen what you mean to me! I could not speak out while I had nothing but hopes to offer you — you — Ann Milburn — who have had everything. But I thought you divined my love. It seemed as if you must know. It seemed as if every one must know. It was hard, so hard, not to blurt out the truth those days we spent in Pau; but I told myself I must wait. I knew that if the Russian contract went through I could provide for you as you have the right to expect. Then it did go through; but somehow — I can't understand it yet; but somehow we were suddenly miles apart. Let us forget that, though. I want to forget everything, except the joy your letter brought me. It was not merely what it said — its words as words — that made me so happy; it was its undertone, its spirit, its soul, which made me dare hope that if I did speak you would listen, that you might learn to love me as I love you. I have not tried to write. I knew I should reach

you as soon as a letter could. I wanted to tell all this face to face, to see for myself, to ask —"

"My letter ?" she broke in with a voice that seemed to belong to some one else. "When did you receive it ?"

"Just before I left Petersburg to come here."

"Only then ?"

"Only then."

"It was written weeks, months, ago, the night you left Pau."

"I saw that. It had been missent, bandied about from city to city. Front and back, its envelope was scrawled with Italian and Russian writing. I was beside myself when I discovered what some one's stupidity had lost me. Instead of knowing you as you are, instead of writing you at once what I have told you only now, I was thinking you a woman without a heart, a shallow title worshiper. I am ashamed to confess how I misjudged you."

"Don't, don't !" she begged, her eyes suffused.

"But I want you to know. I must be honest with you. I can't sail under false colors with you, Ann. I want you to see me as I am before you give me my answer."

"I — I cannot listen !" she stammered, rising.

The footfall of the servant with Page's breakfast sounded in the tiled corridor, and she moved to the embrasure of another window. Under the shadow of San Giorgio the Truscott yacht still confronted her with its reminder of her alliance with Rodoslav. If only she might blot it and all it signified out of her life ! At last she read her heart aright. She knew she loved as she was loved. Yet she must

keep the dear knowledge locked in her own breast. It was ghastly clear that no hint of her engagement had penetrated Russia, or at least the Russia he had known. His first news of it must come from her own lips. If she could only tell him that it was a sham, that her heart was his! But that was impossible. Till all Europe knew what she knew, she must keep faith.

Her agonized ear told her that the room was once more tenanted only by herself and Page. She heard him push back his chair and come quickly toward her. His arms went round her, his lips brushed her hair.

"I love you, Ann!" he murmured. "With all my soul I love you! Have you nothing to say?"

She turned a woebegone face to his. "Nothing," she answered.

"Nothing!" He recoiled as if she had dealt him a blow. "You don't mean that — that it's impossible — that you've changed —"

"I've not changed — no." Her tortured heart could not deny itself that outcry. "But things have happened since you left Pau."

"I don't understand, unless," he grew pale, — "unless you have never cared. Ann! Don't tell me your letter meant only that you wanted to be just! Was I mad to read between the lines? Was I a fool to hope? Why don't you answer me?"

"Things have happened," she repeated lifelessly.

He peered into her face as if some sudden myopia had stricken him. Then, in a cruel flash of disillusion, the truth drove home and his pleading hands sank inert. "You mean you are no longer free," he said.

"Yes," she answered, her eyes as wretched as his own; "I am no longer free."

Rodoslav went unnamed between them.

Eight hours later she stood on the deck of the *Don't Care* and watched the last dome of Venice melt into the evening mist. Those hours also had had their significance. They had witnessed tears, regrets, temptations to seize happiness, cost what it might, chimerical dreams of somehow keeping her word and her lover too, dark moments when she beheld her life a sacrifice in the cause of a doubtful coup d'état. Eight hours of storm and stress, and at the end of it all the deck of the Truscott yacht, Venice fading into the sea, the Adriatic and the Unknown before.

Two factors had played crucial parts in holding her to what she conceived to be her duty. One was Saccarello. Among letters addressed to herself there was by mistake handed to her an envelope bearing the name of the great diplomatist. If the old man had stood before her in the flesh, she could have received no more vivid impression of his tireless, pursuing presence.

"Do you expect Baron Saccarello?" she asked, handing the letter back to the porter.

"To-night," said the man, and held his uniformed shoulders the higher because he could make such a reply. "The Baron always stops with us when he comes to Venice."

Mere spies then were insufficient! Saccarello must stand guard himself, now that the Firebrand neared the outskirts of the Balkans! Now, if ever, Rodoslav had need of her!

The second factor was her Aunt Helen, who had

lightened her deepest darkness by announcing that after all she had decided to accept Mrs. Truscott's invitation.

"Justin thinks it best," she explained. "Oliver's coming has put another face on the matter. They are to be so occupied for a few days that I should see nothing of Justin if I stayed here; but I have told Virginia she need not bring us back to Venice. If she will land us at Ancona, we can return by train."

Ann found her presence on board singularly comforting. Her domesticity tempered the secret drama of the expedition. When all was said, this need be no more than such a cruise as hundreds had taken. Regusa would mark the end of her pact with Rodoslav. Once in Venice again — ah, surely the future would be kind!

Rodoslav himself seemed to wish to make her forget his real errand. He had apparently left care behind in Italy. For all his bearing told, the great adventure, now imminent, might have been the mere pleasuring others deemed it. Their jaunty surroundings scouted the notion of a grim secret purpose. Whose fancy was so robust as to see a filibustering craft in the *Don't Care?* An unfriendly critic once called the Truscott yacht a floating boudoir, and the Truscotts themselves had to admit that its bravery of enamel and brass, its costly panelings and frescoes, its hangings, its mirrors, its general air of cushioned ease, went far to justify the gibe. Nor could its owners by any mental jugglery be made to seem anything more sinister than their normal selves. The stockbroker looked a purser, rather than a buccaneer, in his seafaring uniform, while the sundry costumes

Virginia assumed for the cruise each and all carried a merry suggestion of comic opera.

For that matter, the threshold of the Unknown, as revealed in the island dotted coast of Dalmatia, was scarcely of a character to intimidate. Zara, compact within its walls; Sebenico, rising terrace on terrace to its worn castle; Spalato, with its mighty souvenirs of imperial Rome, — all seemed to her but part of another unspoiled, gay costumed Italy. As for Regusa, its loveliness stripped her of adjectives. She saw it first as a vague mystery of towers and cliffs, picked out by lights. Then came a hurried yet vivid and unforgettable impression of its streets; for Rodoslav would not hear to their sleeping on board.

"You are my guests now," he said. "A carriage is waiting at the pier, the villa is ready, the table is laid. I arranged everything by telegraph from Spalato."

As they disembarked from the launch, an ancient coachman, whose salient points were a row of silver buttons and a smile, greeted Rodoslav. For the moment affection worsted deference in his wrinkled face; but, once on the box of his old fashioned landau, he became a rigid automaton who drove a Prince. There followed kaleidoscopic glimpses of edifices that might have been Florentine, of cafés that looked Parisian, and of narrow, climbing thoroughfares fairly Neapolitan in steepness; while the way they traversed was peopled with blue cloaked officers who belonged in Vienna, red fezzed figures as Turkish as if they walked beside the Bosporus, white-robed friars straight out of the Middle Ages, and an unclassified operatic throng, now bonneted, now coiffed,

now in baggy trousers, now in tight, in gold broidered jackets, and in conventional clawhammers, whom Ann took to be native Dalmatians.

Then, leaving the walled city by a triple arched gate, they wound an upward looping road between the high boundaries of suburban villas. The perfume of locust and orange blossoms and uncounted scents of spring escaped the jealous barriers, blended ever and again with a more tonic breath from the Adriatic beating the rocks in the darkness far below. At last, as the gardens grew larger and the villas more sparse, a gate was flung open before them and they turned into an ilex bordered drive leading to a low, two storied structure of pale yellow tint, which they could dimly perceive was overrun with a tropical riot of purple flowers. The arc light of the porte cochère illumined precisely such a servant as might have opened a door to them in Paris or Vienna.

"Electricity! A butler!" Virginia was taken aback.

Rodoslav smilingly helped her alight. "Did you expect torches and a portcullis?" he asked.

"I know you have a real castle down here somewhere."

"Call it the ruin of a castle," he amended; "but that is in the Herzegovina. You will find this place merely the country villa of a Viennese. My father was nothing if not of his times."

"Sensible man," approved the broker. "If you don't live in your own day, what are you? A fish out of water, if you ask me."

"Fish again!" shrugged his wife. "You're hopeless."

Everything indoor bore out Rodoslav's prediction. Throughout the house reflected the meretricious taste of the late '60's and early '70's of the nineteenth century. Furniture, mirrors, hangings, paintings, the very silver and crystal of the dinner to which they presently sat down, all had the besetting faults of their trumpery period, with a heavy Teutonic emphasis superadded which made lumbering and grotesque what was bizarre enough in the Gallic original. The women made their observations in silence; but the things that Mrs. Blair and Ann merely thought, demanded outlet of some sort in Virginia. As the evening wore on and one monstrosity after another met her eye, her mouth drooped more and more, till at last Rodoslav, who all along had been her amused watcher, burst into a ringing laugh.

"Own up you think it's atrocious!" he charged.

Her inmost thoughts laid bare, Virginia Truscott for the first time in Ann's recollection unmistakably and lavishly blushed. "At any rate, it's not like you," she stammered. "Why don't you have it done over?"

"I could not afford it, for a long time," admitted Rodoslav, with everyday candor. "Afterward — well, it seemed the kind of task a woman ought to superintend."

"How thoughtful of you! And what jolly good fun for the woman!" Then, rounding on Ann, "I suppose you've been mapping your campaign ever since you stepped indoors?" she said.

"Hardly," Ann answered.

Rodoslav came to her rescue. "How could she?" he put in. "I have never mentioned it before. But

I hope she won't hesitate to begin, now that she does know. Why not talk it over among you and tell me what ought to be done?"

Virginia threw herself into it as if it were a game and vollied suggestions on the spot. Ann joined the discussion in spite of herself. Though in the long run it would concern her no more than Virginia, she could not endure the possibility that ideas so preposterous might some day carry weight with him. She was almost angry with Rodoslav for taking Virginia so seriously. Could he not see how faulty was her taste? Were not her gowns, her Pullman car of a yacht, proof of her fundamental absurdity? Had Ann expected in sober earnest to become mistress of the villa, her annoyance could have been no greater. It even colored her manner as she bade him good night.

But Rodoslav was not cast down. His guests above stairs, he made a smiling, even contented, tour of his possessions.

CHAPTER XXIV

Ann pardoned the villa its chattels with her first morning glimpse from her window. Clusters of the purple wistaria she had marked at her coming invaded the very casement; the perfume of orange and locust, that commingled fragrance which ever evokes memories of spring under southern skies, flooded her room with the sun. Just beneath her eye were the formal paths of the garden, its box borders a trifle neglected, its marble nymphs a bit down at heel amid their glades of bamboo and palm. Beyond, through a frame of mulberry and poplar, stretched the wider vista: rocks first, gay with gorse and tamarisk, spiked with cactus and aloe; then, far below, with forest and mountain behind and the sapphire sea before, a city of romance, Regusa lifted her mighty walls and towers.

As she absorbed it all, Ann better understood the emotional force that underlay Rodoslav's great ambition. If this spot in any way typified the wide realm his forefathers had once ruled, what a mean spirited caricature of a man he would be not to dream of its reconquest! The great emprise, always remote and shadowy hitherto, became vividly concrete. She asked herself how he meant to act, now that the time seemed ripe for action, and realized, with wonder, that she knew little or nothing of his actual plans. He had called her his ally; but their alliance had carried with it no sweeping confidences. She knew he aimed to fuse the scattered host of Servian blood

into a single nation, and she inferred that he had won to his support a picked group of leaders who, the signal given, would rally the impressionable many round his historic name. That this implied a coup d'état, dependent on an armed force, she recognized, as she did the likelihood of an ensuing war which more than one great power might find it imperative to join. Beyond this, what did she really know? Who were his lieutenants? What was his plan of campaign? At which point did he mean to strike? All was shrouded in mystery. Standing here on the verge of an outbreak that might set all Europe aflame, she knew no more of its details than she had learned that strange night in Cadenabbia when Rodoslav's will overbore her own.

The days that immediately followed did nothing to enlighten her. Rodoslav seemed determined that, if this were the end, it should be a golden end. She had never found him more considerate or more companionable. Not a hint of his vast responsibilities escaped him. Outwardly he was a man of infinite leisure, their attentive, tireless host. He loitered with them as long as they would under the arches of the Rector's Palace; he pored over the enamels of the treasury in their company as if he saw them for the first time; he shared their exclamatory interest in the picturesque chaffer about La Sponza; he idled with them in cafés to watch the gay hued, ever changing life of the city ebb and flow through the Stradone. Then, the bloom brushed from these novelties, he planned excursions to outlying gardens and cloisters with enchanting views of mountains and sea. So sped a lotus eating week which, in all frankness, it

must be admitted Ann enjoyed. She was two and twenty. To-morrow — surely — would be kind!

Then Virginia, at Mrs. Blair's instance, reluctantly announced that they must go. "Not that I'm ready," she added, as Rodoslav instantly protested. "I should never be ready. But we are due in Cannes the week before Easter, and before that we must pick up friends in Sicily, and before Sicily there is, of course, poor Price Buckley, who would be heart-broken if we disappointed him. I've had a long letter from him since I let him know we were en route, and he says that the first thing we'll see when we put in at Cattaro will be his beaming face. I suspect he is a bit homesick among his Montenegrins."

"Have you set a day to meet him?" asked Rodoslav.

"Yes. I told him Saturday at latest."

"And this is Wednesday!" His manner conveyed flattering regret. "Ah, well, you must not fail him after his trip over the mountains."

Ann, a listener merely, believed his regret less poignant than he made it appear. He was at heart no doubt relieved to be rid of his house party. They had masked his advance. Henceforward he could shift for himself.

But his next words proved her assumption hasty. "It isn't often I can inveigle guests down here, and I'm heartily sorry to give you up," he continued. "I regret it so much that I should like to see you a little way on your journey."

"See us all the way," urged the stockbroker promptly. "Make the *Don't Care* your headquarters as long as you will."

Rodoslav shook his head. "You Americans are the most generous people on earth, but — alas! — I can't accept."

"Then come as far as you can," said Virginia. "After we drop Mrs. Blair and Ann at Ancona, we will land you wherever you say."

"If we don't land them, we'll stand a better chance of keeping him," suggested her husband with facetious intent.

Rodoslav smiled faintly at Ann. "But it's I who want to keep you," he returned. "I want you still to be my guests. Ever since you came I have had it in mind to broach a longer excursion than any we've taken as yet. You expected something very different from this, — something older, more picturesque, — and I had meant, when you were tired of Regusa, to show you my other place. It isn't so comfortable as this villa, in fact, it is scarcely more than a ruin; but you might find it a curious experience to rough it there for a day or two. It's not off your route, — it overlooks the Bocche di Cattaro, — and if you will send your yacht ahead I should like to take you down by land. You have really seen nothing of the interior, you know."

"There is a railroad, isn't there?" asked Virginia.

"Yes, as far as Zelenika; but I wasn't thinking of that; I was planning to motor. I have a car here that is still capable of a good many kilometers, and my valet, as you know, is a competent chauffeur. You will not find the ride tiresome."

Ann let the matter arrange itself without her; but she was nevertheless pleased that the drama of their alliance was not to end so tamely as she had antici-

pated. To say farewell to Rodoslav in this gingerbread villa would be an anticlimax almost ludicrous. But the castle would be another affair. However ruinous, it would provide the background his personality demanded. It would typify, as this pleasure house of his spendthrift father never could, the heroic inheritance that impelled him to the deed he would so soon essay.

They delayed their start till after luncheon on the morrow.

"I wish to bring you there at nightfall," explained Rodoslav. "We'll arrive about the hour when you reached my disappointing villa. Let us hope you will meet no disillusions this time. It was not built for the soft side of life, however, this ruin you are to see. You must expect the primitive."

Keen at the outset, Ann's expectancy mounted as the changing panorama of the coast unrolled. Dipping into valleys prodigal of fig and olive, flying past cascades that shot their white flood into the sea, hugging gray cliffs where only evergreen and gorse found courage to cling, they entered a different land. The uniform of Austria still flaunted its significant note in the village market places; but the dress of the people themselves took on a bravery of color and a grace of line increasingly oriental, and the characters written above the shops conveyed nothing save confusion to the western eye. Finally, just after sunset, from the top of a narrow plateau they sighted the Scandinavian fiord that some titanic jest set down under a southern sky to become the theater and spoil of battling ages.

"The Bocche di Cattaro," said Rodoslav. "Those

mountains are, of course, in Montenegro. Somewhere beyond them, thinking doubtless of the delightful Truscotts he will soon rejoin, is Mr. Price Buckley."

The delightful Truscott of masculine gender cast a look of disfavor on the grim, snow capped heights. "People will put up with anything to hold down a Government job," he moralized.

Rodoslav laughed. "Montenegro isn't so inhospitable as it looks from the outside," he said. "Not a door would be closed against you."

"And Price Buckley isn't there merely to hold office," championed Virginia loyally. "He has wanted a post in the Balkans ever since he entered the service."

"That's true," said Ann. "He mentioned it to me in Paris long before he dreamed he would be appointed to Montenegro. He wants to write a book about the Servians."

"Then he won't have found Cettinje dull," commented Mrs. Blair. "When a man makes up his mind to write a history, he moves into another world. A cousin of mine married a historian. He was so absent-minded that he told the census taker he had five wives and one child."

"Let's hope Price has no such oriental hallucinations," laughed Virginia. "We shall know Saturday. I wired him last night of our change of plan. I did not want him to happen on the yacht in the harbor and go aboard before us. I don't know of anything so annoying as to get to a place and find your hosts gadding about somewhere else."

They diverged from the highway into a sharp turn-

ing byroad which taxed the springs of the car and the patience of the chauffeur. Traversing a valley, they climbed another height, whence through the dusk they descried still other eminences crowned with fortifications.

"Austria remembers that the Bocche has often changed hands," said Rodoslav laconically.

Peering up at these outposts, black against the twilight, Ann felt that she faced at last the stern realities of Rodoslav's undertaking. How many such fastnesses reared their grim barrier between him and victory? He had told her that he was not dreaming of battles; but by battles alone could he hope to subdue such obstacles as these. Awed, foreboding, half afraid, she rode on into the gathering night and so came to their journey's end.

As first sighted, Rodoslav's ancestral stronghold seemed even more of a ruin than his disparaging words had led them to expect. Seen high above a turn of the road, black like the fortresses against the sky, it looked little more than a curtain or two of crumbling masonry upheld by no less dilapidated towers. As they rounded the base of its supporting cliff, however, they realized their error. Other crenelated walls loomed solidly from out the night, and then a massive gateway, guarded by flanking towers, which looked still capable of resistance. A rank growth of cactus overran the moat; but the drawbridge, to Virginia's delight, was still practicable for such as came afoot, and, abandoning the motor, they trooped laughingly across it, torches set in iron holders on each side of the battered portal lighting the way.

Their exclamations pleased Rodoslav. "It has been many years since torches flamed here," he said. "A lantern serves us ordinarily."

"You ordered them specially for us!" cried Virginia.

"Yes. I wanted it to seem a real castle to you. But remember," he warned; "real castles are seldom comfortable."

"It isn't comfort we want," she protested. "It's romance, and you have given us that beyond question. How splendidly your servants carry out the picture!"

"They are my steward and his sons. They are shepherds by trade."

The two younger men in red fezzes, short embroidered jackets, and loose trousers, hastened out to help the Swiss with the luggage. The steward himself lit a smaller torch and piloted them across the flagged courtyard and through a second archway into a second court, more than half ruinous, with its far end open toward the narrow plateau that the castle and its outworks had obviously once filled. Rodoslav waved his hand toward the gaping breaches which ivy and pink masses of tamarisk strove vainly to stop.

"The Turks did that," he explained. "They meant to blow it all to pieces; but luckily they found other things to occupy them. My people had lost their possessions; but they kept their courage. From the Bocche di Cattaro to the Danube they fought."

"Was it long before they got the castle back?" asked Mrs. Blair.

"Four centuries."

The stockbroker whistled. "Time enough for property to depreciate," he observed dryly. "It must have changed proprietors frequently."

"Yes," Rodoslav assented. "The Turks, the Venetians, the Austrians, the French, and again the Austrians have all held it. It was my grandfather who finally bought it back. It was far past its usefulness as a stronghold, of course. The batteries you saw on the hills superseded it long ago. The purchase was thought a rather Byronic piece of business on my grandfather's part, — Byron was the fad then, — but nobody opposed his throwing money away on sentiment. Nowadays people would call it folly."

Ann alone among his auditors divined that something deeper than sentiment had carried weight with the Byronic grandfather. He too had dreamed!

Stirred by the old memories, Rodoslav took the torch himself and guided them from point to point along the devastated walls, explaining their ancient uses. The rising moon shed a pale light on the gray stones, steeping them in a wan and melancholy haze which touched Ann like certain haunting music. Straying from the group, she brooded upon the stormy past of the ancient fabric and asked herself if it was again to become the theater of historic deeds. Could Rodoslav bridge the centuries?

She faced the relic of a medieval bastion as she pondered and, her eyes adapting themselves unconsciously to the gloom beneath its still solid vault, she suddenly spied an object that, in all their varied history, these walls could never have housed before.

Strewn about with the packing cases in which it had made its journey from Pau, stood Rodoslav's aëroplane.

Turning, she met Rodoslav's eyes; but he said nothing of her discovery till he had surrendered his torch and they followed the steward's lead across the worn flags toward the habitable rooms.

"Did it surprise you?" he queried.

"Only at first. I remembered what you said at Corenno."

"You have not forgotten Corenno?"

"I remember your saying you would go among your people on wings."

"But it was you who said it, you who divined what I meant to do."

"Did I?" She quickened her pace. "But tell me, had the Austrian customs no questions to ask about your packing cases?"

"Of me?" He gave a low laugh. "Ah, no," he added. "Vienna considers that I too am Byronic."

CHAPTER XXV

Rodoslav had not spoken idly when he warned his guests that they must expect to rough it. There were rooms and passages in plenty which could still boast a roof above them; but the livable part of the structure was limited and rudely furnished. Ann's bed, an iron cot of military simplicity, stood in a stone walled chamber which would have satisfied the notions of an ascetic monk. Her aunt's quarters and the Truscotts' were as austere. The one apartment that made pretensions to comfort was the low vaulted hall where they assembled for dinner. It was too plain ever to have served ceremonial uses, — Rodoslav said it was commonly called the guardroom, — but, with candles set about its walls and its great hooded fireplace and darker niches banked with yellow gorse and some unknown blossom of flamelike vividness, it took on an air of festivity which, contrasted with the cells where they had removed the dust of the ride, was almost frivolous.

They were waited upon by the wife and daughters of the steward, dressed, like the men of the family, in the peasant costume of the Herzegovina. The tableware was such as might have been set before them in a country inn; but the thick soup was savory, the roast fowl cooked beyond reproach, the salad of toothsome crispness, and the red wine of a

body and bouquet that beguiled the stockbroker — who declared he felt like a robber baron — to drink deep and defy rheumatism to do its worst. In truth, the spirits of the trenchermen who had once tenanted the hall seemed to possess all of them. The talk owed nothing to intellect. Anything passed as wit. The prime affair was the food and drink which they consumed with the honest joy in eating of ruder days.

This elemental mood outlasted the meal, and still ruled them when a strange chanting drew them outdoors, and thence back under the archway to the courtyard they had first traversed. But this was no longer obscure. Wherever the ancient torch holders still clung to the decaying masonry flamed lights. Over against a stretch of gray wall, where some Venetian master of the place had sculptured the conquering lion of Saint Mark, was grouped the bright garbed family of the steward. So placed, grave, statuesque, they struck as weird a note as the chant itself.

The latter, intoned in deep bass by the old shepherd, became at Rodoslav's coming a duet which the wife shared, whereupon the daughters darted to the fore and began to dance. They kept their arms pinned as closely to their sides as if they were of wood; but nothing could be less wooden than the young girls themselves. They were as graceful as they were picturesque, and picturesque they were beyond question. As brown eyed as Rodoslav himself, yet darker skinned, their kerchiefs and aprons as gay as gypsies', their silver ornaments flashing in the uncertain light, their glances and atti-

tudes a seductive compromise between shyness and invitation, they were at once of the Orient and the West, barbaric and refined. No music save the curious antiphony of the chant accompanied them. Nor did they need more. They were music themselves. As they finished they kissed.

With a shout the two young men leaped forward to replace them. No feminine dance this! Their daggers drawn, their eyes flashing dramatic defiance, they looked as if nothing short of murder would slake their hate. Their faces became inhuman masks, terrible to see; they sprang into the air as if whipped on by demons; their fierce outcries woke echoes which might have been the voices of the slain Turks and Servians who had made this spot their battle-ground. This too was the Orient; but the Orient divested of languor, its savage heart unveiled. Then, abruptly, these dancers too embraced and were done.

The guests applauded with the smug emotion of moderns who, caught out of themselves for the moment by primitive passion, are relieved to reflect that, after all, humanity has mended its manners.

"It is a war dance, of course?" said Mrs. Blair, with a shudder.

"Yes," Rodoslav answered, "a form of the Horo."

"I suppose they were pretending to fight the Turks?" hazarded Virginia.

"Any Servian enemy will do," he returned, with a glance at Ann.

"Lord help the enemy!" ejaculated the stock-broker, his robber baron mood wilted. "I could fairly feel a yatagan between my ribs."

The steward stepped from the group and drew his bow across a stringed instrument of odd shape and deep resonance.

"I have asked him to sing," explained Rodoslav. "You will hear some of the songs that have put heart into my people even in defeat."

The words of the chant that followed were incomprehensible; but, even had Rodoslav not ever and again dropped a low voiced comment, they would have known that the old man sang of epic things. Like the dance, the music was its own interpreter, and to Ann, knowing what she did of the man at her side, profoundly moving. She needed not to be told when the minstrel mourned the loss of Servian freedom. For the moment she was a Servian herself, mourning too. She was a Servian also when the theme changed from a lament to a vaunting recital of the power and glory of the fallen Empire, and, as the song in fiery climax swelled to prophecy that the Czar would rule again, her heart thrilled to its heroic summons. Was it not her cause too? If the Empire rose again from its ashes, if the united Servians raised Rodoslav to the throne of his fathers, would it not be in part her work?

Her lashes were wet as the song reached its end, and Rodoslav, who had missed nothing her face had to tell, contrived to get a word with her as they strolled back toward the guardroom.

"I saw that it was your song as well as mine," he murmured. "You realized what it means to me here and now. Listen, my ally! There are things I must say to you before we sleep. When the opportunity comes, take advantage of it."

"Will not to-morrow do?" she asked.

"No, no!" he replied. "I cannot wait till to-morrow. It must be to-night."

She did not wonder to see him so strongly moved. The marvel was that he betrayed so little emotion. Had she been in his place, dreaming what he dreamed, planning what he planned, she felt that the epic chant would have unmasked her heart to the dullest eye.

The chance she was to seize had not presented itself when the party broke up for the night. At the last moment, however, Rodoslav made the carving of the chimney piece a pretext to draw her aside.

"The Venetians stuck their lion everywhere," he said for the benefit of the stockbroker; then, as Truscott moved away toward the others at the far end of the hall, he added hurriedly: "You'll see a passage almost opposite the door of your room. It is dark, but safe. Follow it till it branches, and take the turning to the left. That will bring you to a door opening on a little court you have not seen. I shall be waiting there."

"Surely to-morrow —"

"I have told you I cannot wait. Are you afraid of this rookery of mine?" His smile mocked her. "Or are you thinking of the conventions? Who will know? But I do you an injustice. You have proved yourself superior to petty obstacles. You know too that I would not ask you to come if I did not need you. Our time is short, my ally."

"Very well," she assented, touched by the gravity of his final words; "I will come."

In the gray austerity of her bedroom she had her

misgivings; but the united compulsion of the place, the night, his personality, and her own avid desire, now that the end was at hand, to miss no more of the great drama than she must, drew her irresistibly toward the secret interview.

Half eager, half afraid, she waited in the thick walled recess framing her door until Rodoslav's guests and servants should have disposed themselves for sleep. Satisfied at last that no one was astir, she let herself out, stole a glance right and left, and slipped across the dim corridor into the deeper obscurity of the passage. Such light as penetrated here came from a rude lamp swinging from the vaulting near her door, and, as it merely tempered the darkness at the beginning of the passage, she had to distinguish the turning by feeling. Once past the forking of the way, however, she was guided by a scythe-shaped patch of moonlight which filtered between the top of a pointed arch and a door set just ajar. Immediately outside this exit, stood Rodoslav, tensely expectant.

But it was the spot where she found herself that for the first moment held Ann's regard. She had issued upon a kind of hanging garden poised between the seaward façade of the castle and the sheer cliff. Shut in on three sides by moldering walls, its fourth side commanded the whole western heaven and a vast sweep of the Adriatic lying like a great silver shield below. A parapet guarded this hazardous outer edge of the tiny garden, and at one end of this barrier, its delicate columns in strange contrast to the ivied tower behind, glittered a gothic belvedere. Beneath this canopy was a Venetian well

head, from the yellowed lip of which a clear stream of water fell into a marble basin and was thence by some hidden channel spirited into the ancient walls. All looked as eternal as the rock below, save the canopy. Medieval in manner, its stones were obviously not a dozen years out of their quarry.

"What does it mean?" Ann turned on Rodoslav.

"You know."

"But I don't," she said.

He scanned her face intently. "You know," he insisted gravely. "You proved to me to-night that you had not forgotten Corenno. You know what this is; but you are unwilling to admit it because you scoffed at Destiny. You laughed when I told you in Italy that you would yet stand beside me here. But you are here. You have fulfilled your fate. You have seen my shrine."

Ann's startled gaze returned to the fountain. "Your shrine?" She puzzled a moment. "Ah, I remember now. It was your offering to the dew maidens, the good fairies your people believe haunt springs."

He bent to her eagerly. "I knew you had not forgotten," he said.

"But I had. It went out of my mind after Corenno."

"That does not matter. Destiny remembered. Destiny brought you here at last, as I foretold."

"It was chance."

"No, it was not chance. Quarrel with your star no longer, my ally! Surrender yourself to its guidance! Be what from the beginning of things it was decreed you should be!"

His look frightened her. "Why have you brought me here?" she demanded, recoiling.

"That you might see Destiny fulfilled."

His answer angered her. "Let us have no more of this folly," she charged. "You said you needed me. Wasn't it true?"

"True?" he exclaimed. "I need you as no man ever needed woman! I love you as no man ever loved woman!"

"We ended that at Nice," she interposed.

He blocked her way as she would have left him. "No," he declared, his back against the door, "we did not end it at Nice. For a time I thought it ended. I doubted Destiny myself. I could not see clearly. I feared we must part at Venice. It seemed inevitable. But it was not written that we should part. A way opened before us. The Truscotts became the chosen instruments of Fate."

"You have brought me here on a fool's errand," said Ann, attempting to pass him.

As she came near he swept her suddenly into his arms. "You shall not go till you have made your submission, my lady of caprice!" he cried, his face close to hers. "From the first you have eluded and tantalized me. But I would not have had you otherwise. If you had been easy to win, I should not have thought you worth the winning. Yet you have been a hard mistress. You made me suffer in Nice. You don't know what you made me suffer. I should have believed your kiss, not your words. You would not have given me your lips had your heart not prompted you. I have learned to read that elusive heart of yours, my sweet. It was a

sealed book at first. I could make nothing of it for weeks and weeks. Then I grew wiser. Pau taught me some things, and Nice — Nice showed me that I could not do without you. But Venice was the turning point. I saw that if I pleaded you became more stubborn, and I resolved not to plead. I did not ask you to come to Regusa, and you came without asking. You came because your heart would not let you stay behind. I longed to take you in my arms as we stood there in Venice listening to the chimes. I longed to cover your pouting mouth with kisses that night we reached the villa and talked of its refurnishing. But each time I told myself to wait till you stood with me here by my shrine."

"You are blind!" she gasped, struggling against his tightening clasp. "Let me go!"

He held her the closer. "You must not resist now. The pretty game is over. Give me your lips again. Atone to me for all your coldness! I am hungry for your love. I think of you day and night. You are always with me. Nothing under heaven is so precious to me! You fill my life!"

"What madness are you saying! Think of your great ambition, your people —"

"I can't," he answered. "I can think of nothing but you."

The terrible significance of his words suddenly overwhelmed her. Gone in a breath was the heroic vision upon which her fancy had fed. She had become to him what his worst enemies would have her — his sole, absorbing, blinding passion! She had succeeded the Others!

For a moment the shock of the ignoble truth left her lax in his embrace. Then, stung with the shame of it, she wrenched herself from his arms and, gaining the door of escape before him, fled into the darkness.

CHAPTER XXVI

It was inky black within; but, beside herself at her discovery, she rushed heedlessly forward, counting on the weak aid of the lamp in the far corridor when she should reach the turn of the passage. But no light, however faint, greeted her straining eyes. She was positive she had come far enough to see it if it still burned. Could a passing servant, a chance draft through the crazy vaulting, have blown it out? She halted, panic-stricken. How far out of her way had she stumbled? What pitfall of the ruinous structure might not yawn at her feet?

Then, sharp in the stillness, came the scrape of a match and, far behind, a blue sulphurous point started out against the darkness and then, bursting into an orange flame, revealed Rodoslav's face. He looked uncannily white thus presented, pale as a dead man, and with something of the rigidity of death in his features. He horrified her. Shrinking back against the damp stones, terrified lest he come upon her, yet not daring to flee, she watched his slow advance. Striking match after match, he came on, and then, a scant three yards distant, disappeared in the mouth of the passage she had missed.

Her relief was brief. He was now between her and her refuge. Finding her door unlocked, her room empty, he would stand in wait at her threshold. If

she delayed her coming too long, he would return and search her out. Find her he must in the end. Even if she brought herself to risk the unknown region behind her, it would offer but a temporary haven. He would know every cranny of the old pile. It was better to go forward and face him. She would be near the others. If need arose, she could call for help. He would realize this. He would regain control of himself. Screwing her courage to its utmost pitch, she felt along the wall to the forking of the way and set her face toward she knew not what. But this latter stage of the return was no longer in total darkness. As before, a dim illumination filtered from the corridor. But it was a different light this time, cutting the gloom at a different angle. It fell, fear told her before her eyes made certain, from her open door. He had pushed effrontery to its last extreme. He dared await her in her own room!

Anger leaped to fortify her courage. Her head held high in outraged pride, her eyes, the eyes he had delighted to watch, hard with contempt, her will, pliant no longer, roused to fight and subjugate the will that had too long made a plaything of her own, she crossed the threshold. But once again this strangest of men was to surprise her. The antagonist she had steeled herself to meet had vanished. Beside her bed, his face buried in its counterpane, his shoulders convulsed, the prey of crushing grief, knelt another Rodoslav.

To Ann, who had seen him in a hundred moods, this last phase was the most unnerving of all. Her towering anger collapsed in an instant, and, with a

face as white as his, her heart pounding, hysteria her master, she threw herself headlong down the corridor and beat wildly upon her aunt's door.

After what seemed an eternity, Mrs. Blair admitted her. "Is it burglars?" she queried, still drugged with sleep. "Is the house afire?"

Ann flung herself upon her breast and wept with the abandon of a child and, like a child, begged incoherently to be taken home. The older woman mothered her in drowsy perplexity.

"But what is it, deary? Why are you still dressed? What has frightened you?"

"It all frightens me," sobbed Ann, clutching her tighter.

"No wonder!" Aunt Helen's disapproving glance ranged the somber walls. "The place is fit only for owls and such wild creatures as those dancers. When you're married, don't ever let your husband coax you back here."

A fresh tempest of emotion shook Ann. "I'll never marry!" she declared.

"What's that?" She had awakened her listener at last.

"I'll never marry! I — I want to be a nun!"

Mrs. Blair perceived that she had to do with hysteria, and dealt with it firmly. "Be anything you choose," she said; "but don't give the Truscotts the idea that the place is haunted. If you must wail, do it in a pillow." She drew the girl to the bedside and sat down with an arm about her shoulders. "Let's hope they have slept through this hubbub," she added. "There is no telling what Virginia's imagination would make of it."

"She couldn't make it more dreadful than it is. Nobody could."

"There, there!" soothed the elder woman. "Molehills always look mountains at night. What's a lover's quarrel? Just an excuse for the pleasure of making up."

Ann raised her head.

"I don't love him," she protested.

"You don't love Rodoslav!" Mrs. Blair was too startled to maintain the rôle of nurse. "What are you saying?"

"The truth. I've admired him, feared him; but as for loving — no, no!" Her shudder added its corroboration.

"But your engagement —"

"A sham."

"A sham engagement!" She brushed a bewildered hand across her eyes. "Doesn't the man want to marry you? Was all his devotion a pretense?"

"No, no; it's real — too real. I found that out to-night. It's his caring that makes everything so tragic."

"Tragic!"

"Yes. There is no other word." Ann bent before another gale of sobs as she recalled its tragedy. "Yet I am to blame, too," she asserted. "I wanted him to care. I could not rest until I made him care."

"Though you didn't love him!" Aunt Helen's face was blank. "I can't make head or tail of the affair."

"Poor Aunty!" Ann smiled wanly amidst her

distress. "You would call the whole story sheer madness, if you knew it. But I can't tell you — at least, not now. Some day you'll understand why I deceived you. It was for a great cause. I did it to help Rodoslav in — in a great work. I was his ally, his shield — But I'm saying too much."

"It seems to me high time you made a clean breast of this business, Ann," said her aunt decisively. "You owe it to Justin and me, to say nothing of Oliver Page."

Ann lifted her head. "Why do you add Oliver?" she asked.

"Because if you had had eyes for anybody but Rodoslav, you would have seen long ago that he loves you. Couldn't you realize that he is one man in a hundred?"

"Yes."

"We hoped so he would attract you, Justin and I. Perhaps — I don't know — perhaps we made it too plain. We both love him. He is so wholesome, so true. He is not a man to fear, Ann. He would not ask such things of you as —"

"Don't, don't!" implored the girl. "I don't need to be told what he is. I — I've seen it all for myself. If only — But I cannot explain. Don't ask me to explain, Aunty dear. Only get me away from here. Take me away to-morrow. Say I'm ill — whatever you like — to the Truscotts. I can't spend another night, another day even, in this place. You must promise to do as I ask you!"

"I don't need to promise. Do you suppose I'd let you stay a minute longer than is necessary after what you've told me? As for Rodoslav —"

"You must not act differently toward him," enjoined Ann. "Be sorry for him; but don't think ill of him. I did not mean to make you blame him. You must not! I was not myself when I rushed here. I had had a shock."

"What do you mean?"

"I cannot tell you that either. But I'm over it now. You can see that for yourself."

Mrs. Blair had her own convictions in the latter regard. Though she could order her thoughts and curb her speech, Ann was far from mistress of her nerves. She shivered as if the mild night wind chilled her to the heart; her eyes were intensely bright; her pallor had given way to a feverish flush.

"Try and rest now," she urged gently. "You shall sleep here with me. I wish you had come here in the beginning."

Ann fumbled with cold fingers at the fastening of her dress. "I wish I had," she said.

"I'll unhook you." She freed the gown from her shoulders and with a wave of tenderness stooped and kissed the firm young throat. Then, in matter-of-fact reaction, "Did you leave a light in your room?" she asked. "I want to fetch your things."

Ann imprisoned her with desperate arms. "Never mind my things!" she begged. "Don't leave me! You must not leave me!"

"But you will be uncomfortable if I don't."

"I shall be wretched if you do. Please — please don't go!"

Apprehensive of another outbreak, the older woman yielded, and they lay down together on the narrow bed.

Ann's relief was for the moment ineffable. Had her aunt come upon Rodoslav as she last saw him, the situation would have been irretrievable. Pity rather than anger or fear colored her feeling toward him now. She was remorseful that her nerves had betrayed her into flight and partial confession. Why had she not held fast to her courage, and seizing her advantage, persuaded him to be again his nobler self? It would surely have been possible in his softened mood. It would have been in its way a reparation. She owed him some such service. He had not reached his blind infatuation unaided. From the hour he wounded her vanity in Cadenabbia she had not ceased to ply her arts of coquetry to bring him to her feet. She had succeeded; but at what a price!

Nor was it Rodoslav alone who paid. She felt as if she bore the stain of a cardinal sin. Time might fade, but it could never quite obliterate, the thing she had done. She had sacrificed on the altar of vanity something of her self-respect. Had she not also forfeited her happiness? Every word her aunt had spoken of Oliver had been a knife thrust. Appreciate him? Ah! Did she not? Modest, dependable, long suffering, kind, a man of her own race, a being she understood, who would have understood and cherished her, she saw him clothed in his true character now when insight could bring only bitterness. If his love outlasted the news of her engagement, it could scarcely survive the explanation of that engagement's unreality. Like her aunt, he would find it inexplicable. Till Rodoslav attempted the deed she had caused him to abandon, her lips were

sealed. And that might be never. Opportunity might not knock twice at his door. Had he not told her that not for a hundred years had the time seemed so fit? When he should be most prepared, every faculty alert, he was — as she had seen him.

Her tortured fancy again evoked the stricken figure, and with the remembrance came new alarm. She had forestalled discovery by her aunt; but what if one of the Truscotts or a servant should pass that wide-flung door? She thought of a score of reasons that might prompt one or any of them to traverse the corridor. She forgot the hour. Every absurdity of her sick brain took on plausibility. She pictured the various faces of the household as they might appear confronting such a sight. They all knew it was her room. What would they think? What would they say? She lifted herself upon her elbow and with straining ears waited for the dreaded footfall. Every faint noise of the ancient structure, every whisper of the ivy outside the casement, shortened her breath. She told herself she would go mad unless she knew whether Rodoslav still kept his terrible vigil. If he was gone, she could perhaps sleep; if he was still there, she would entreat him to go away.

She crept from bed and dressed without rousing her aunt, who had long since fallen asleep. The moon had swung low, and its light, broken by the cross of the mullion, lay in a bright bar across the worn flags. It soothed her to see it thus, and, moving on sudden impulse to the window, she let the passionless radiance bathe her face. Then, dropping from the pale disk to the scene it transfigured, her

gaze traveled the court from the decaying towers opposite to the shattered outworks on the cliff's far edge. Here her startled eyes halted upon another warmer glow in which the moon had no part. Then, even as she recalled the strange use to which this spot was put, Rodoslav for an instant stood out unmistakable against the arched opening.

Ann clung to the casement in an ecstasy of relief He was supine no longer. He had risen to his better self. His thoughts were of the work that awaited him. He was making ready the winged steed that would bear him among his people — the people who would hail him Deliverer and Czar.

CHAPTER XXVII

THE ensuing morning a dejected horse bore a stout and none too graceful cavalier up the final steep turn to Rodoslav's picturesque ruin. Man and beast were alike suspicious of the bridge over the cactus-choked moat, and made prudent halt just short of the ramshackle planking. Man and beast were alike blown; but the rider found breath to hail the slits that did service for windows in the gateway towers. His words were Servian, his accent emphatically something else. Both were wasted. A double echo and a rustle of leaves as a little green lizard scurried from a warm ledge into the ivy were the only response.

The visitor tried again, adding a polite phrase to his greeting; and the result was even more discouraging. The lizard preserved utter silence, the echo, as if bored, deigned but a single reverberation. A shadow crossed the fat man's brow, and his dimples did the utmost dimples could to express anxiety. Casting about for a step, he reined over to a convenient rock, drew his feet from the stirrups, and, with a sigh in which the horse joined, slid in safety to the ground. Tying the animal to the stump of an olive tree, he made his way with the caution of a young elephant across the decrepit bridge, and passed into the courtyard that had witnessed last night's entertainment. The torch holders still held the

charred ends of the flambeaux; but every vestige of the life they had illuminated had vanished with their flame. The caller's glance noted them as he scanned the windows; but as these outer precincts were plainly uninhabitable he promptly made for the archway opposite. The second court looked as devoid of human life as the first, and, after a brief survey, during which his dimples betrayed increased perturbation, the plump newcomer again lifted up his voice.

This time he employed English. "Hello there!" he sang out. "I say! Where are you all? Hello! Hello!"

An echo of different quality and far greater politeness than its neighbor of the gateway helloed back to him with great animation; but the tranquillity of the scene was otherwise unbroken.

The visitor was purple from his exertions; but he made another effort.

"Truscott!" he bellowed. "Oh, Truscott! Are you there? Truscott, I say!"

Perseverance met its reward. A head at last appeared at a window. It was a drowsy head, uncombed, blinking, bewildered, but still recognizable as the stockbroker's. For the space of a minute it frowned out into the sunlight. Then, opening its lips, it spoke.

"Well, I'll be damned!" it ejaculated.

The man below was too relieved to quarrel with his welcome. "I thought you'd gone," he said.

The head, wide awake now, withdrew itself like that of a startled tortoise, only to reappear accompanied by a disheveled, sleepy, yet still charming presentment of Virginia Truscott.

"It is — it is really Price Buckley!" she asserted, and then, in a roguish warning, "Don't you dare look!"

"He wouldn't want to if he had my view," remarked her husband. "Still, it's a chance to prove that your hair is naturally curly."

"Isn't he horrid?" appealed Virginia.

These amenities of the married did not interest Buckley.

"Is Mrs. Blair here?" he asked quickly. "And Miss Milburn?"

"Of course," answered the broker. "But you won't find them up this early. Take a look round the ranch while I dress."

"Early!" said Buckley. "Look at the sun!" But he addressed an empty window.

He did not profit by the opportunity to explore his surroundings. His historic curiosity seemed atrophied. When the Truscotts descended they found him rooted to the precise spot where they had seen him first.

"The devil take castles," grumbled the broker, shaking hands. "I had to shave with cold water. Not a bell to ring! Not a servant within call!"

"They're probably fagged out from their dancing," suggested Virginia. "It exhausted me even to watch it. I should be asleep now, Price, if you hadn't called us." An uncontrollable yawn lent emphasis to her statement. "But we're overjoyed to see you, even if we're not sufficiently awake to show it. It was charming of you to ride to meet us. The Prince will be as delighted as we are."

The diplomat listened with an abstracted air.

"I shan't intrude on Rodoslav," he replied. "I merely want to say how do you do to you all and then join you in Cattaro as arranged. Isn't Mrs. Blair up yet? It's almost noon, you know."

"Noon!" They chorused the word at him.

"More, if anything. Is there a Rip Van Winkle spell about this place? What ails your watches?"

"I've ceased to be a New Yorker," drawled Virginia lazily. "I don't carry one."

"Mine's out of whack," said Truscott.

"Then believe mine." Their torpidity was beginning to vex Buckley. "Wouldn't it be as well to look up Mrs. Blair? She may have caught this sleeping sickness too."

Virginia stretched herself and laughed. "If she has, she won't thank me for waking her," she replied, and set off indolently.

The stockbroker turned a heavy-lidded regard on Buckley. "Suppose we drape ourselves over that bench by the door," he suggested. "I haven't the energy of a snail."

The younger man walked with him to the seat, but himself remained standing and distrait.

"Find your new berth exciting?" queried Truscott, languidly sociable.

"So so."

"Do you like the Monteniggers — or whatever they call themselves?"

"Very much."

"Pretty women?"

"As pretty as you'll find anywhere."

"Any fishing?"

"I haven't had time to ask."

Whereupon, as the conversation threatened to expire altogether, Virginia came dawdling back with an amused expression.

"Mrs. Blair was still asleep," she announced.

"And Miss Milburn?"

"Ann is up and about somewhere. Her aunt can't understand why she didn't call her."

"She and Rodoslav probably wanted to sidestep the chaperons," Truscott remarked. Then, the arched eyebrows of his wife reminding him that Ann's former suitor might not relish the jest so keenly as some, he tactfully added, "Speaking of peaches, Buckley says the Montenegro article is quite up to standard."

Both sting and antidote were unfelt by the abstracted Buckley. "I have something particular to say to Mrs. Blair," he abruptly announced. "Please help me to see her alone."

"Of course," said Virginia.

"Kick me if I get in the way," invited her husband.

Buckley's seriousness was tempered by a smile. "It isn't you two I want to avoid," he explained.

Whoever he had in mind, his fears of interruption were groundless. He was alone in the courtyard when Mrs. Blair appeared in the doorway.

"I only just learned that you had come specially to see me," she said.

Buckley shook hands nervously and proposed a stroll along the outer ruins. "I have things to say about Prince Rodoslav which just at present I would rather nobody overheard," he told her.

Following Ann's disjointed revelations, his announcement startled her; but she kept silent till

they had put nearly the full reach of the cliff between them and possible auditors.

"Is it so serious a matter?" she asked.

"Yes, Mrs. Blair, most serious. I should not be here otherwise. Depend upon it, if I had seen any way of getting out of this errand, I would have taken it. For more reasons than I can explain, I wish this duty had fallen to some one else. It is very difficult for me, very painful."

"I see that."

"If your husband were within reach, I should have gone to him; but he is not, and I feel that some one close to Miss Milburn ought to know what I know without delay. God knows I wish her well from the bottom of my heart! It will go hard with her, this news of mine; but if I held my tongue she might suffer more. The facts —"

"Are you quite sure they are facts?" Her own sense of justice, no less than Ann's plea for clemency, impelled her to caution him to weigh his words. "Men in Prince Rodoslav's position cannot escape harsh criticism."

"I realize that. But there was no malice, only pity, behind the confidences made to me. I am not repeating the kind of gossip any tourist may hear over the table d'hôte, Mrs. Blair. The things I know I learned not as a traveler, but as a student, as an official. I couldn't have come upon them in any other way. Let me make that more clear to you —"

"You need not."

"I had rather, if you don't mind. I can put it in a nutshell. The truth is, ever since I was a boy I have been interested in the people who live down here in

this corner of Europe. I read everything about the Servians I could lay my hands on. I learned to read their language, and I came to have the ambition to write about them some day. My appointment to a diplomatic post in the Balkans realized a dream of years. I mention this because it explains why the Montenegrins, who are surely the noblest of the Servians and have fought the hardest for liberty, have given me their confidence. I have found friends among them from the humblest to the highest, and, though I haven't the right to tell you precisely who spoke to me of Rodoslav, I may still say that you can hardly put his rank too high. He is incapable of injustice, this man. His attitude, as I said, is one of pity. He pities Rodoslav so much that it was only when he learned that Miss Milburn was a friend of mine that he disclosed things that are known only to three or four great chancelleries. You see, I am not interfering without grave cause —"

"Yes, yes!" she interrupted, now thoroughly alarmed. "But what is it I ought to know?"

Buckley skipped the remainder of his preamble.

"Maybe you have an inkling of it already," he said. "Has Rodoslav ever mentioned his claim to the old Servian throne?"

"Not to me." Then, recollecting Ann's hysteric allusions, she added, "But I've reason to know that he has something on his mind. Can it be he dreams —" She stopped, daunted by the grandiose audacity of her surmise.

The diplomat nodded. "Dreams — that's the word," he assented. "Poor devil!"

"What do you mean by that?" She perceived

that he had reached the pith of his difficulty. "Is it such an impossible dream?"

"Yes."

"Then what have the chancelleries to do with it? Isn't Europe full of pretenders?"

"Not of Servian pretenders who are Austrian subjects. That is why the Powers watch Rodoslav. If he were purely Servian, they would not bother about his claims; but he is a subject of Franz Josef, and it isn't to be supposed that Vienna would object to see an ex-officer of the imperial guard mount King Peter's shaky throne in Belgrade. But it is another matter with Italy and Russia, not to mention little Montenegro, which is a friend of them both. They have seen Austria press quite far enough below the Danube. They are taking no chances with Rodoslav. They've managed that he should do little more than dream. Their methods — well, the less said of them the better. They're not new. Catherine de' Medici used them when poison or a dagger thrust was inconvenient. Diplomacy has stooped to base means to preserve the status quo in the Balkans. It has not scrupled to make use of Miss Milburn."

"Of Ann! Surely she hasn't knowingly —"

"Helped Rodoslav's enemies? No, no! How can I make it clear to you? They believed, these people, that if he fell in love with her he would have no more thoughts for politics, that she would be all in all to him. But it hasn't turned out that way. Rodoslav must have taken Ann into his confidence from the first. He has used her as a shield to go on with his revolutionary schemes. At least he thought she shielded him. But he was mistaken. Every

move he has made, every move he hopes to make, is known. I can't tell him this, I can't let you tell him. I've given my word of honor. I can only warn you that he is most dangerous company for any one while he remains on this soil. If you take Ann away, he may follow her and give up his wild hopes, save himself —"

But he had lost his auditor. Mrs. Blair could see only the hysteric fugitive who had fled to her in the night. Her one thought was to gather her again under her protecting wing. Buckley, panting in her wake, found her alarm contagious, blundered through court and corridor after her, and so came to Ann's own room. The girl's belongings lay as she had disposed them last evening. Of Ann herself there was no sign.

CHAPTER XXVIII

Mrs. Blair turned bewildered from her survey. "She has packed nothing!" she cried. "I don't believe she has been near her room since she left me."

"Since she left you?" Buckley labored for composure. "When was that?"

"I don't know."

"But you must have some idea."

"I mean I did not hear her leave my room. Ann came to me in the night."

"What?"

"She was nervous, and we slept together. It's a lonely enough place by daylight; but at night — Neither of us wanted to stay here any longer. We meant to get up early and pack. But I overslept. I was tired out. Ann must have seen that I was tired, and dressed without waking me. But why hasn't she got her things together? I shan't have a moment's peace till we find her."

"I'll rout out one of the servants," said Buckley, less calmly than he thought. "We'll probably find that she is exploring the ruins."

By himself, his face became a mirror of acute dismay. He hurried through the apparently habitable quarter of the castle without meeting any one except the puzzled Truscotts, and, evading their solicitude at his manner, made his way outdoors and stared round at the more dilapidated wings, uncertain which

part to essay next. As his eye plumbed the archway leading to the entrance proper, it was lured across the outer court to the gateway itself by the flash of a cherry-colored apron, and he dashed to meet its owner with a precipitancy which so confused the girl that his first linguistic broadside was wholly wasted. His face reassured her, however, and she promptly told all she knew. She was the steward's daughter; but she had no knowledge of Prince Rodoslav's whereabouts. She had gone at an early hour with her mother and sister to work in the fields below. At the same time the men of the family had left for their usual shepherding. It was understood that the Swiss was to prepare breakfast for the guests. If the lazy fellow had not done so, then she herself —

Buckley quieted her hospitable concern. "But I want to talk to the valet," he said. "Where is his room?"

"Near the kitchen. I will go and look for him."

"I'll go with you."

"But the kitchen —" Her kerchiefed shoulders protested its unworthiness to receive so fine a gentleman.

"Never mind how it looks. It's the valet I want to see."

He followed her through a prisonlike door down a murky flight of steps and along a tortuous series of passages to a vaulted chamber equipped with spits, ovens, and fireplaces sufficient for a regiment.

"The room is just beyond," said the girl.

But it was needless to go farther. On a stool beside the huge table, his head in his arms, slumbered

Rodoslav's jack of all trades. Buckley prodded him back to consciousness.

"Where is your employer?"

Still sodden with sleep, the man blinked, swore, and threatened to thrash his persecutor.

"Where is Prince Rodoslav?"

"Fat fool!" observed the valet, awake to the more striking traits of this intruder.

Buckley beckoned the girl. "I want a pail of water," he said. "The colder the better."

The man stumbled to his feet and put the table between them. "A thousand pardons, Monsieur Bucklee," he entreated, his bluster changing to servility. "It is long since I have seen you. I did not know you at first. I was not awake. I am not myself yet. Losing my sleep last night wore me out."

"What do you mean by that? Why did you lose your sleep?"

"His Highness got me out of bed to work on the aëroplane."

Buckley's eyes widened. "Here!" he exclaimed. "Rodoslav has brought his aëroplane to this place?"

"Yes, Monsieur. It was shipped from Pau. Badly handled it was, too. It was daylight before we got it in shape. I wouldn't work that way for everybody; but his Highness has always been very liberal with me. Besides, he helped. He's a good mechanician himself, the Prince. He worked as hard as I did to get the machine ready for Mademoiselle."

"For Mademoiselle! Do you mean Miss Milburn?"

"Yes. He said she must not be disappointed of a morning spin."

Buckley turned as white as a florid man can. "He took Miss Milburn up with him?"

"I suppose so."

"Aren't you sure?"

"No, Monsieur. He told me I might go back to bed. I came here first to get a mouthful to eat; but I dropped asleep. Did you want to see his Highness immediately? He'll be here soon, I think."

The American stared into vacancy without answering, and then took an uncertain step toward the door. "Did the Prince say when he would return?" he questioned.

"No, Monsieur."

"Or which way he meant to fly?"

"No. But he would start toward the sea, of course. There is no good opening through the walls on the land side. He'll have to make a half circle over the water to get back, too. It will take good judgment, that; but he'll manage it without so much as straining a stay. He's wonderful at landing. One day at Pau —"

Buckley did not tarry for the reminiscence. Blundering up the first staircase he found, he issued unexpectedly into the dining hall and came upon Truscott probing the depths of a cabinet.

"I'm foraging for a whisky and soda," he confided. "Seen any signs of Rodoslav? Now that I know the time, I'm finding an appetite." Giving up his search, he dropped into a seat and so caught sight of his friend's face. "Hello!" he ejaculated. "What's come over you, Price? Is there anything really wrong?"

"Wrong!" Buckley's voice shook. "My God! you're sitting on a volcano!"

"Eh!" Truscott bounced off his bench as if it were a small Vesuvius.

"You can't conceive what's been going on under your nose, and I can't tell you. Heaven only knows what's to pay! I can't bear to think of it; yet I've got to think of it, find some way —" He bit his nails as the thought process took its unwelcome course.

The broker clapped him lustily on the back. "Nerves, my son, nerves," he diagnosed easily. "Montenegro has been too much for you. The thing for you to do, if you ask me —"

A convulsive grip on his arm cut short his prescription. "Truscott, listen to me! We're facing a terrible situation. Rodoslav has undoubtedly made off with Ann Milburn!"

"Made off with her!"

"Yes, yes — in his aëroplane."

"My dear fellow, you are in a state of nerves! Rodoslav wouldn't bring an aëroplane down here in this country —"

"You're wasting breath. He did bring it. He had it right here and worked over it all last night. The Swiss told me so. God only knows what he's done with Ann, or what I'll say to Mrs. Blair! I warned her that Rodoslav was dangerous company; but I didn't dream he could have carried Ann off in a flying machine. Who's to break such news as that!"

An abrupt change in his companion's expression spun him about. His question was answered. He himself had broken the news. Ann's aunt stood

behind him, her face as white as her hair. She swayed slightly; but as the young man sprang to support her she straightened.

"I don't faint," she said mechanically.

He hovered about her with all a man's incompetence before feminine distress. "Don't let me frighten you," he urged fatuously. "Everything will come out all right. Rodoslav is an expert aviator, always master of his machine. The best of the flying men admit that. Cool — why, he's a second Wilbur Wright for coolness! He never seems so sure of himself as in the air. It makes him concentrate, steadies him." Poor Buckley came to the end of his tether with a lame, "Isn't it so, Truscott?"

"Sure," seconded the broker. "He can drive an aëroplane like the devil himself. Don't you fret yourself about that proposition. It's gilt edged. You'll find it's only a lark, Mrs. Blair. They may come buzzing in here any minute. I — why, I'd bet money on it!"

No false hopes buoyed their auditor. The Ann who fled to her in the night could not have joined this mad flight in a spirit of larkish adventure. The secrecy of it all, the haste, the absence of a parting message, all argued violence. And even as her knowledge was fuller than her comforters', so was her self-control more assured. Latent forces no one dreamed this quiet woman possessed came to the fore.

"These Montenegrin friends of yours," she said, turning on Buckley, "do they know where the Prince would be apt to go?"

"Yes, but it's a place —"

"And you know also?" she interrupted.

"Yes."

"Then we needn't fold our hands and merely wait. How soon can I reach the yacht?"

"The yacht!" Her query no less than her fortitude took the broker by surprise. "I don't know exactly. She lies off the ferry at Kamenari. How far is that, Price?"

"We could make it in half an hour, perhaps, with Rodoslav's motor," answered Buckley; "but I don't see —"

"I see," said Helen Blair, and addressed herself to the elder man. "I will ask you and Virginia to wait here," she went on. "Tell her as little as you can. It will make it easier to get Ann away if she returns." Her voice caught at her last words; but she took a fresh grip on her courage. "If they do come back, bring Ann to Kamenari. Will the people on the yacht do as I ask?"

"If they don't I'll sack them!" declared Truscott, kindling at her energy. "I'll dash off a note that will stir things up. But you can't chase an aëroplane with a yacht, you know."

"Yes, I know," she answered. "I can't tell you where I'm going; that is, not now. It may be of no use; but I must go all the same. It — it seems the only chance."

When the *Don't Care* some hours later poked her impertinent little nose into an experiment which the Italian war department was about to try in the privacy of a cliff-lined bay belonging to Italy's good friend and ally, Montenegro, the most disgusted face peering down from the bridge of the cruiser belonged to Baron Saccarello.

"We might as well have picked out Venice or the Bay of Naples!" he grumbled. "Is there one spot on earth where tourists don't go?"

Justin Blair, who was in no doubt as to the yacht's identity, looked worried. "She belongs to friends of mine," he explained. "My wife and niece are their guests. I'm afraid it means a summons for me."

Saccarello's eyebrows became formidable. "Surely, my friend, you did not —"

"No," Justin cut him short, "I did not tell the Truscotts to pick me up; but I let my wife know where I was going."

"And why you were going?"

"And why." Justin did not relish the catechism. "I've found it's better to take a woman into your confidence than let her jump at conclusions. I had to explain that I was coming down here with you and Page; for she was bent on giving up the yachting trip to stay with me in Venice. She doesn't know and doesn't want to know anything about aëroplanes as naval auxiliaries. She wants me. Something has gone wrong."

Saccarello's brows continued expressive. Focusing his binocular on the approaching craft, he viewed it with a growing impatience which at last exploded in a sonorous, "Body of Bacchus!"

"What's up now?" Justin was depending upon his unaided eyesight.

"The worst that could happen. That fat jackass will send the whole story to his department."

"What jackass are you talking about?"

"The one your Government has made Minister to

Montenegro. Haven't we had annoyances enough, without young Buckley? Haven't we —" The English language became inadequate.

Justin seized the glass. "Yes, it's undoubtedly Buckley," he said, "and that's Helen getting into the launch."

The old man snatched back his binocular. "The fool is coming along!" he groaned. "But he shan't come aboard. Not a step!"

"Keep your hair on," enjoined his companion, heedless of the futility of the metaphor. "The tarpaulins are still on the machine. It looks as much like a gun carriage as an aëroplane. Buckley wouldn't recognize it if he did come aboard. But he won't. I'll head them off and go back to the yacht. If Page keeps to his cabin —"

Saccarello shambled hastily toward the deck. "By all means he'll keep to his cabin!" he snapped. "Surely your wife won't have been so indiscreet as to mention him."

In the immediate sequel, however, the first intelligible word he seized of the parley that Justin on the ladder held with the intruders in the launch, was the name of the aviator. Thereupon the American, pale and staring, wheeled and caught sight of him.

"Page!" he gasped. "For God's sake get Page!"

The hooked beak vanished as if potted by some unseen sharpshooter; but an instant later Saccarello reappeared at the top of the gangway and began hobbling down to them.

"I must ask an explanation," he said stiffly, with the slightest possible recognition of Buckley's existence. "If this call —"

"Have you sent for Page?" interrupted Justin, his face working.

"Certainly not."

The distraught man groaned and would have brushed by him, but the Italian's frail body revealed unexpected strength.

"I must know to what extent outsiders share our private business," he stated, blocking the way.

Justin threw up his hands. "This is no time for red tape," he cried. "Nobody wants to pry into things. My wife and Buckley have brought bad news. That man Rodoslav has mixed himself up with some revolutionary plot and dragged my niece into it too."

"A plot! Rodoslav!" Saccarello's heavy lids fluttered. "Who is responsible for this tale?"

"Buckley here can vouch for it."

"Ah, Mr. Buckley!" drawled the old man. "Pardon the skepticism of a veteran, but —"

"Stow your skepticism," cut in Justin. "It doesn't matter whether you believe it or not. The important fact is that Rodoslav has carried Ann off in his aëroplane, and —"

"Is that all?"

"All!"

"It's hardly sufficient to justify this commotion. Your niece is an American — with an American young woman's notions of propriety. She has ridden with Prince Rodoslav before."

"In an aërodrome, at a civilized hour, not from a ramshackle castle in the Balkans. They started from that place of his you pointed out to me yesterday as we came by, started before anybody was up. The girl's life is in danger —"

"Surely not." Saccarello shed a beatific smile. "Isn't it plain that the young people have taken it into their heads to elope? They are both romantic. An aëroplane elopement would have an appeal to them that you and I, my friend, can scarcely appreciate."

"You're piffling away time." Justin's square chin asserted itself. "We have got to find them, and Page must help us. He's the only one who can help us. There's a chance, if he flies back into the Herzegovina —"

"Over Austrian territory! In a machine belonging to my Government!"

"But you don't understand —"

"I understand only too well. The gravest complications might come of it. I may seem hard-hearted; but a girl's caprice —"

"Caprice!" roared Justin. "I tell you she has been decoyed into a nest of revolutionists! Buckley knows what he is talking about. Do you want affidavits? Documents? My God, man! Haven't you any human feelings? Are you just parchment and red tape?"

Buckley saw fit to intervene. "As to evidence," he said, fixing the Italian's reluctant eye at last, "I think I can satisfy Baron Saccarello. I have not been in the diplomatic service long, but still long enough to have reason to know —"

"That I am merely cautious, not stubborn," interposed the pupil of Cavour, who recognized trump cards by instinct and proposed to give Buckley no chance to blurt out unwelcome truths in this company. "Your word will suffice, sir. I waive my

objections. If the affair should stir up Vienna, I shall find some means to smooth it over. Madam, let me give you a hand over the gunwale."

The rising diplomat made no attempt to follow Ann's agonized relations to the cruiser's deck.

"You also, I beg." Saccarello waved a gracious hand.

"Thank you, no," declined Buckley.

"But do me the honor. If you surmise why we are here, I know you are too honorable to make use of the knowledge."

Buckley bowed ironic acknowledgments. "If I had cared to make use of you, Baron," he retorted, "I should have begun after our meeting in the foothills back of Pau. But don't let me keep you. I can say what I have to say to Page here."

"But at the cost of precious time. Pray come aboard. There has been enough delay."

Buckley yielded, and Saccarello linked arms confidentially.

"As between colleagues," he said, "I trust you will see fit to say no more to Page or my friend Blair than is strictly necessary. Their point of view is too personal to be judicial. There is no need to go into details that properly concern only one or two chancelleries."

Buckley nodded his agreement. "You have removed the necessity," he replied. "But, as between colleagues," he repeated the phrase with pardonable relish, "as between colleagues, how could you, knowing what you certainly knew, allow your friend's niece to go the lengths she has gone?"

"But Blair was not my friend when the affair

began. Afterward," Saccarello gave his habitual shrug, — "well, the peace of Europe is a Moloch which demands many sacrifices. A brutal fact, you may think; but there it is. It exists."

The great man's capitulation was opportune. In another moment he would have confronted mutiny. The earlier colloquy across the gunwale had penetrated an open port near which, puzzled at the injunction to keep below, Page himself chanced to wander. When the Blairs gained the deck they found the inventor tugging at the tarpaulins that screened his aëroplane.

The official report of the first trial of the new Government flying machine in conjunction with his Majesty's cruiser *Umbria* was couched in colorless terms. In substance, the account that finally reached its appropriate pigeonhole in Rome stated that at a quarter before five o'clock on a certain day in March the aviator in charge made an ascent from the afterdeck. The cruiser experienced some vibration from the motor of the apparatus; but, excepting a strong rush of air, no shock attended the aëroplane's departure. It rose to a height of three hundred meters and demonstrated that —

But what was officially reported, subject to the editorial blue pencil of Baron Saccarello, is purely the concern of the Italian Government.

CHAPTER XXIX

Ann was far from the victim of high handed violence they pictured. Every vestige of fear left her as she gazed from her window across the moonlit court. The Rodoslav toiling over his aëroplane was the Rodoslav who had captivated her imagination, the hero of romance, the doer of deeds, who was to carve a niche for himself in history. He was also, there was no disguising it, a man she had done more than a little to injure. Did he realize this now? Did she seem a mere coquette? Had he risen to his higher self through a conviction of her essential triviality? Every question was a thorn. It was unendurable that he should go his way thinking as ill of her as she thought herself. The great drama of their alliance must not end thus. Her exit was too ignoble.

A dispassionate observer would have had grounds for labeling this contrite mood as yet another phase of incorrigible coquetry; but those who observed Ann were never completely dispassionate. She herself felt only an aching desire to set herself right in his eyes, to convince him that she was not all froth, that his success was precious to her, that if that wayward thing, her heart, could have given itself wholly to him, never would man have had such a helpmate. By some casuistry this knowledge was

to strengthen his hands in that future he had again found courage to face.

Letting herself soundlessly from her aunt's room, she retraced the corridor through which she had sped in headlong panic, gained the dim hall, and so passed out into the courtyard. Here she paid propriety the tribute of a detour; but beyond this regard for the opinion of any chance night gazer housed by the old walls, the conventions did not trouble her. She believed that now, if ever, was the time to rehabilitate herself. To-morrow would not serve. Rodoslav's nocturnal toil told its own story. There would be no more dalliance.

He started as he caught sight of her just beyond the radius of his lantern; but he made no movement toward her. Grave, watchful, master of himself at last, he left the word to her.

"I saw you from the window," she said. "I knew what it meant, and I was glad — oh, so glad! I knew that we needn't part in anger and misunderstanding, but as you and I ought to part. That's why I've stolen out here. I could not bear to have things end as they were ending. I want you to know that, even if I cannot give you what you ask, I can still feel —"

"Good-by," he checked her bruskly.

Ann winced. "You're still angry?"

"No," he denied.

"Then you are unjust in cold blood, which is worse. Don't let our friendship end in bitterness."

"Friendship!" He wreaked all his contempt on the word. "Oh, can't you see there is no middle ground for you and me?" he broke out harshly.

"Why have you come here to torment me? I've had my lesson. I see what a fool I've been to dream that you could love. Love! The ice water that runs in your veins will never know the meaning of it."

She was stung to recrimination. "If I never know the meaning of it, I shall have you to thank," she retorted. "Do you think helping you has cost me nothing?"

His face softened, and he came and stood before her. "What has it cost you?"

"Never mind," she answered, regretting her outburst. "It doesn't matter."

"It does matter vitally. If you have had your own heartache —"

"Well?"

"It would make a difference. I couldn't think harshly of you then."

"It's true," she avowed.

"Is it the American, after all?" he queried slowly.

"Yes."

"I guessed long ago how it was with him," he said; "but you — when did you find it out?"

"Too late."

"Too late? Do you mean after our engagement?"

"Long after."

"Was it at Venice, the day he returned?"

"Yes."

"And you still stuck to me?" He had become all gentleness. "You sent him away thinking he hadn't a chance?"

"What else could I do?"

Rodoslav suddenly bent and kissed her hand. "Poor little ally!" he said. "So you know the sting of it, too?"

Ann's face grew warm. "I'd never have told you," she stammered, "if you had not misjudged me."

"Then I'm glad I misjudged you. Can you grudge me this knowledge? Be charitable. I haven't your chance of happiness."

"My chance?"

"You need not say it so hopelessly. I must do without what I want; but Destiny won't ask that sacrifice of you. Tell Page the truth when you meet. There will be no reason to keep it back. I shall have crossed my Rubicon."

Ann never admired him more. "Heaven grant you victory," she said.

He seemed not to hear this fervent prayer. "I had come to think of it as our Rubicon," he went on. "You were to cross with me. You were part of it all. As you shared the dream, so were you to share the fulfillment. It will be a thing to stir the blood, that uprising of the Serbs. They lie like tinder for the torch. For centuries they've waited for the right leader, a man of their own race, a scion of the house that gave them the Empire they still glorify and mourn. You have heard how they cry out in their songs for it to live again. They ask for a second Stephen Nemanya to be Czar of all the Servians. And he will be Czar of them all. Everywhere they will join the great crusade. Bosnia, Dalmatia, the Herzegovina, Montenegro, Hungary,— all are quick with the leaven of revolt. When they

see Servia rally to my standard, they will all follow. My little handful will become an irresistible host. They will flock to me as the Scotch flocked to the Young Pretender, as the English would have flocked to him too, if he had been bolder. I shall not turn back from Belgrade as he turned back from London." He paused and for a long moment stared straight before him as if tranced by the vision. "But you will not be there," he added abruptly. "You've chosen to give it all up. You've chosen to love another."

"Don't," she entreated.

"Yes, I'm wrong," he acknowledged. "You had no choice, none. You never thought it out. Blind, clumsy Nature did it all. The color of Page's eyes, the texture of his skin, the feel of his hand, some mere physical trait which he has and I have not, Destiny only knows what trifle has cried out to you that he is the man of all men." He brooded for an instant over his bitter philosophy, and then turned again to the vision she must no longer share. "I saw you the idol of my people," he told her. "I saw them follow me because of you, because they would know you were my shield and buckler. They would have built legends around you, worshiped your beauty, served me for your sake, made you the Jeanne d'Arc of their cause. Now, when I come alone, it will not be the same. They will not trust me with the same trust."

"What are you saying? They know nothing of me, your people."

"Some of them know. I don't mean the masses, the simple folk who weave legends. It is the hand-

ful who are to rouse the many who know you, who will question me about you. One or two of them have even seen you."

"Here?" She felt as if she walked amid invisible presences. "Since I have reached the Balkans?"

"No. In Paris and in Pau. They realize what you have signified to me. I never succeeded in winning them over till you and I struck an alliance. They call you — they are plain spoken — my safeguard against myself. They have put faith in me because of your faith. They will ask why you have forsaken me at the crisis, what I have done to turn you against me."

"I can't believe I count so much."

"It's that I count so little," he admitted sadly. "They value my name, it's an asset, a rallying cry, but they don't forget that some who have borne it were weak. More than one of my family has been Austrian at heart. My own father cared only for Strauss music and women. As for me — well, I'm not musical; but —" he dismissed his handicap with a shrug. "You are a symbol," he concluded, "a symbol of regeneration."

"They will believe in you," cried Ann. "They will believe in you as I do."

"I hope," he said simply.

"You will prove what you are."

"I must prove it in the face of doubt now. If only I could meet them once with you, let them see that you were standing by me —" His gaze questioned hers intently for an instant. "We can do it," he added slowly, "if you will."

"How can it be a question of willing?"

"It is simpler than you think. Our meeting place is in the hills near the Montenegrin border. The distance need not stand in the way. I could motor you all over to see a picturesque monastery that's in the neighborhood, and then, while the others were exploring, you and I would slip away for a time."

"It's impossible."

"Why? Haven't we a day left? You did not plan to reach the yacht before Saturday. Leave it to me to persuade the others. Unless," he hesitated, "unless it is really you I have to persuade."

"Don't think that. I would do it if I could." Her heart was in the protestation. "But it is impossible. When — how shall I tell you? — when I left you to-night I ran to my aunt's room. I could not help it. I could not control myself. I said wild things — nothing definite — yet things that frightened her. I told her I could never marry you, that our engagement was a pretense to help you in a great work —"

"Don't you call that definite?" he exclaimed. "But it isn't for me to reproach you."

"You could not reproach me more bitterly than I reproach myself. I was afraid. I made her afraid. I begged her to take me away in the morning. Now you know why it's impossible for me to do this thing. I can't unsay what I said to Aunt Helen. She would not believe me."

Rodoslav brightened. "Let's make a clean breast of it and ask her help," he suggested.

"No, no! She doesn't understand you as I do.

She could not see your need. But you know Aunt Helen. She would be the last person in the world to let herself be drawn into such an affair. Don't dream of going to her. You might ruin everything by it."

He threw out his arm in a baffled gesture. "Think of it!" he cried. "There they are, not an hour away as the crow flies, as I myself could fly —" He swung round, stared hard at the aëroplane, and then, hope mounting afresh, once more faced Ann. "As we could fly if you would," he ended.

"But I've shown you —"

"If you only would," he persisted. "I thought I brought this machine here to spy on the forts, to use in the great campaign; but all the time Destiny meant it to serve you. Don't you see how simple it is? No long climb over mountain roads — merely a flight no longer than I've often made, scarcely longer than we took together at Pau. Don't you want to meet these men who are to help me change the face of Europe? Doesn't it stir you to think of standing for once in the very midst of this thing you've so far only skirted? I know it does."

"Yes, yes," she admitted. "It's true. But it's idle to talk of it. When Aunt Helen wakes —"

"You will have returned."

"Returned! You're not asking me to go to-night — now?"

"No, at dawn. We shall sweep upon them with the sunrise, those fellow conspirators of ours. You'll not take them for men ready to restore an Empire. They'll seem merely a hunting party, a little group of friends camping in the hills. They look for me

any hour. I sent them a messenger from Regusa telling them to be prepared. You won't be able to say much to them, — only one or two speak French or English, — but it won't be necessary to talk. Simply make them feel that you believe in me — you will know how. And then I will bring you back. If any of the people here are astir when we come, we shall pass it off as an escapade. I shall have dared you to a flight before breakfast as I might for a gallop or a game of golf. Who expects anything more serious of the quixotic Rodoslav? Will you do this last service?"

It seemed in a measure an atonement, and she was passionately eager to atone.

CHAPTER XXX

He became all activity as she gave her consent. "You must rest first," he said. "Lie down in your room. I will wake you when it is time to go. Wear a thick jacket of some kind under your motoring wraps. It will be cold at first."

She scouted the idea of sleep; but sleep came to her, notwithstanding. Then, as the east was paling, Rodoslav's discreet summons roused her and she once more took her way to the vaulted hall. Here he awaited her with a loaf of black bread and a bottle of wine.

"It is homely fare; but I advise you to try it. I could lay hands on nothing else. The domestic arts were omitted from my schooling," he added whimsically, as he served her. "This is the first meal I ever prepared."

Ann nibbled and sipped to please him; but in the main she breakfasted off excitement. As they came out into the wan light, he startled her by saying that he had been obliged to call the Swiss to help him.

"The machine would not have been ready otherwise," he explained.

"What will he think?"

"Nothing unusual. He has had to do many fan-

tastic things in my service. Don't worry about him. I sent him back to bed long ago."

Ann's knowledge of the real difficulties of aviation was happily shallow. Had she ever seriously tried to understand them, Rodoslav would not now have had her for passenger. Their very start would have affrighted her. But it had no terrors for her pilot. His chief concern was to quit the castle quietly, and to this end he had pushed his machine as far out upon the cliff as he dared. Being Rodoslav, he dared greatly, and most aviators would have balked at so scant a runway; but short starts were his hobby, and the practice of the aërodromes stood him in good stead as he sped out along the narrow tongue of rock and at its sheer edge took the air.

As at Pau, Ann's thoughts at the outset were all for the aëroplane itself. The wind flung back by the propeller cleaving its pathway, the drone of the whirling blades, the rhythmic beat of the motor, the exhilaration of rushing movement through space, — these were the phenomena that thrust themselves upon her as they swung out over the Adriatic and then, rounding high above the coast with its shrunken castle and distant pygmy forts, faced eastward, and so surprised the first pink advances of the coming day on the topmost peaks of the Montenegrin chain. She shook off the bondage of the machine at that. Could anything in life equal this flight into the face of the morning? Were mists ever so beautiful as those which trailed their soft banners through the valleys of this mountain land?

Rodoslav took a more practical view of the mists below, and could have dispensed with them alto-

gether. They obscured and distorted landmarks. He was thankful, moreover, that his course took him well above the erratic currents that tossed and swirled the gray scarfs into such graceful shapes. He saw without enthusiasm how they streamed upward against the flank of the higher land toward which they were bound, and said to himself that there would be need of deft steering presently. And while his eye marked these things his ear kept anxious vigil upon the behavior of his engine. It was not doing all he asked of it, the motor. While Ann thrilled before the magic that transmuted pearl to coral and coral to ruby, his mind delved in the oily recesses of the mechanism, passing its cylinders and shafts and wheels in mental review, questioning if he had neglected any factor that might take an ill timed revenge. He could think of nothing he had left untested, and yet —

Presently even Ann's untrained ear perceived an irregularity in the heartbeat of the friendly monster that had shown her the first real sunrise of her life. She remembered that after all it was an insensate machine, with all a machine's capability for insensate mischief. Was Rodoslav's control unerring? How near those mists had come! How damp it had grown! And how windy! Then, as a gust swung them half round, the vital heartbeat with ghastly abruptness ceased, the aëroplane sank nauseatingly beneath her, and a near peak, seen beyond the propeller, jerked upward like a view in a mishandled stereopticon. They were falling — falling as a stone falls! Yet she scarcely grasped the terrific fact before it was over. She thought "This is death!"

and even as she did it realized that Rodoslav had achieved a miracle and snatched them from destruction. Whatever else he was not, this man surely was one of the world's great aviators. As calmly as if he toured a perfect highway, he shifted his elevating rudder, stayed their plunging fall, and sent the machine planing stably down toward whatsoever landing the Destiny he believed in might provide. Destiny was not prodigal. The mists threw their white veil over the level places of the valleys, if such there were. On every side jutted rock or spiked masses of forest. The barren cliff on which he brought the disabled aëroplane to a halt seemed the one haven in a bristling wilderness.

"At least it's a foothold," said Rodoslav quietly.

Fear still clutched Ann by the throat. "Thank God we're alive!" she cried.

He helped her to the rock without reply and moved cautiously off into the mist, which with their very landing billowed up and over their refuge. Ann shrank back underneath one of the aëroplane's outspread wings and clung to it as if it were the sole link binding her to her vanished world.

"I know approximately where we are," said Rodoslav as he came groping back. "By the time I've put the motor to rights the mist may have cleared altogether."

He went methodically about his examination of the engine, and Ann, watching him at his task, was influenced by his bearing. Perhaps, after all, that fearful plunge through space was nothing an aviator might not expect. Rodoslav certainly disregarded

it. He applied himself with most matter-of-fact directness to his workman's task.

"You can turn your hand to such things!" she said, thinking he had never seemed more the Prince.

"I shouldn't trust myself to fly if I couldn't," he replied. "But I like the work. If I hadn't felt called upon to tinker an Empire, perhaps I should have gone in for mechanics. I might even have lived in America, invented an aëroplane, found favor in your sight. Who knows?" The irony, if it was there, lurked in the words themselves, rather than his tone. "This promises to be a tedious business," he said after an interval of silent labor. "I shall locate the trouble in time, — I always do, — but that's neither here nor there. The truth is, if I fixed it in five minutes we should be none the better off. This mist isn't clearing. It would be lunacy to try and fly farther in it. We must give it up."

"Give up the meeting!" Her disappointment was unmistakable.

"No, not the meeting," he smiled; "the flight. It's not a long way on foot."

"I'm willing," said Ann.

"But it's a hard way."

"I've done mountain climbing before."

"In such shoes as those! No, I'll tramp it by myself and bring my friends to you. They'll be eager to come to you when they hear you're waiting here. It's as out of the way as the other spot, and they can help me with the engine. You won't be afraid to stay alone for awhile?"

"No."

"Don't move about till it's clearer." He drew off his leather aviating jacket and laid it across her shoulders. "You'll be cold," he said, as she protested. "I should only find it a burden. And now to bring the Mountain to Miss Mohammed!" he added in gay farewell. "You'll like those splendid fellows. No leader could ask better or braver. They're true as steel."

Ann crept back underneath the wing of the aëroplane and began her wait. At times the drifting mist left her the solitary mistress of an island. Again it would submerge everything with its damp flood. Once as it subsided she had a glimpse of peaks, clear-cut and glorious in the upper air; but the vision was fleeting. It grew warmer as the leaden minutes dragged to an hour and then another, and to the plague of cold succeeded the torment of hunger. She was giddy with hunger, her thoughts dwelling with ravenous persistence on the loaf they had left unfinished. Why had she not choked it down? Why had she put the wine away scarcely tasted?

Then, for a time, she could think of nothing but her thirst. Somewhere, far below, a hurrying mountain stream mocked her suffering, and, made desperate, she began hunting a way of descent. Thereupon a sudden shifting of the enveloping cloud put a check to her exploring. A chasm yawned at her feet as the curtain lifted. Another step would have hurled her into unknown depths. But she did find water. Retreating in panic toward the aëroplane, she came upon a meager supply cupped in a hollow of the rock. It was only the brackish residue of

some rainfall; but it served. Had it been a crystal fount, she could not have hung over it with keener gratitude.

Meanwhile the veiled sun, a dim, imperfect nucleus of light, neared its zenith, and to the ills of the body were added the rack and thumbscrew of that arch-inquisitor, the Mind. She was torn with anxiety as she pictured the ado at the castle. Long since they would have missed her. What were they thinking? To what steps, after the revelations of the night, would her frantic aunt be driven? What should she say to them when Rodoslav took her back? If he did take her back! Where was he? Did he really know the terrible land she had spied in that appalling instant on the cliff's edge? Or, even if he knew it, would not this clinging white terror distort it beyond recognition? She believed him lost beyond doubt. She could with difficulty thrust away a more tragic possibility. Was the Great Adventure to end at the foot of a precipice? A bruised figure —

Then, stumbling through the ghostly light, a very ghost himself, came Rodoslav.

"Have you hurt yourself?" Shocked at the change in him, she sprang to meet him. "Are you ill?"

"Not in body," he answered, and, brushing by, fell feverishly to work.

"Was it useless to try in the mist?" she persisted. "Couldn't you find your way?"

"Yes, I found my way." He seemed to drag the words from him. Then, in passionate outburst, "Can't you guess the truth?" he demanded.

"Haven't I the look of a beaten man? Can't you see I'm ruined?"

"Ruined!" she faltered. "Surely not that. If they have discouraged you, these men you trusted, you must find others to help you. Don't regret them," she urged, her sorrow changing to anger. "Be glad you are rid of such followers. I hope you heaped the contempt on them they deserved, called them the cowards that they are?"

"No."

"You let them go without a word!"

He met her eyes. "They were gone before I came," he said heavily.

"Gone! There was no one there?"

"One man, one wretched old man, my own servant. I went to meet the flower of Servian chivalry, the marshals of my army. I found my coachman."

She was silent before his revelation. How solace a man who had lost an Empire!

With hard, graphic strokes Rodoslav filled in the picture. "Old Nikolai crawled out of the bushes as I started up the last trail. I had sent him from Regusa with messages. You remember him, old Nikolai, — the servant who came to meet us at the pier? He would give his life if I asked it. He risked it only to-day. He was famished from hiding in the bushes to warn me. Think of it! My coachman the only one of them all! The others — the others saved their skins."

"They were there and went away?"

"Some of them. Two or three only. I don't blame them so much. They saw that it was hopeless. They had been tricked too."

"Tricked?"

"One man, a man I trusted as I've trusted few, turned informer. Everything he learned found its way to those who had bought him. How Saccarello must have laughed in his sleeve as he watched me! We played a comedy for his benefit — that's the truth of it."

The catastrophe was so sweeping that it overwhelmed her; yet for his sake she tried to fight down dismay. He must not be overwhelmed. "You'll rise above this," she prophesied. "There will be some way out, something you can do."

"There is something I must do," he answered grimly, wrenching at a stubborn bolt. "I must get you out of Montenegro."

"Are we in Montenegro!"

"Yes — Montenegro, where every man is a soldier and I am his enemy. They want Servian liberty, these mountaineers; but not at my hands. I am too tainted with Austrian blood to be trusted. They condemn me untried. But you must not let me frighten you," he added, with a change of tone. "This mist has become our safeguard. I'll put the engine in shape soon. I'll take you back somehow. I owe you a future."

"But you?" she asked. "What of your future? Where will you go?"

"Not home, certainly — the places I've called home. They'll take measures of some kind at Vienna. They'll be forced to do it. But there's Paris," he went on bitterly. "I can join the other pretenders on the boulevards. You need not recognize me there when I become shabby."

"Don't speak so," she begged. "I shall want to know you — help you — always."

He turned away his face without reply.

For an hour, two hours, three, the whole afternoon, Ann, sick with pity, watched him at his task. Like some piece of tireless mechanism, knowing neither thirst nor hunger, he toiled on. Never still, his laborious figure ever came and went in the vapor that had been at once their foe and friend. At last evil smelling smoke issued from the crippled motor and hoarse sounds provoked uncanny responses from the primal rocks. Not since the birth of the world had this chaos given forth such outcries. To Ann's distempered fancy they were as the voices of unclean spirits, the fiends, the witches, the vampires in which this strange people Rodoslav had thought to rule still had faith. What would be the quality of their mercy, the men who believed such things? Fear stalked a horrid specter in the now thinning mist. The air was clearing rapidly. To what espionage from beneath might they not soon be exposed?

Then Rodoslav threw down his stained gloves, and she ran to him.

"You're done? We can go?"

"Yes," he said. "It was the magneto. The stupid Swiss had over-oiled it. The armature was drenched with oil. I've thought of a device that might make such mishaps impossible. I must talk it over with an expert. Something may come of it."

She breathed more freely for his everyday reponse. Work had restored his self-command. He could think of other things than the supreme disap-

pointment. He was even beginning to adjust himself to his altered fortunes.

"We'll start as soon as the sun sets," he told her. "That will bring us back in the dusk. Of course I shan't try to make the castle; but the landing I have in mind is near it. You'll find it only a short walk. Tell the others whatever seems best. It doesn't matter now. If you can manage it quietly, send me the Swiss. That's all, except my gratitude. Somehow, I can't put that into words. It's real, though, my ally, very real!"

Ann choked back a sob. "Don't — oh don't let your future be merely Paris and the boulevards," she petitioned.

"I'll not," he promised. "That was a cry of pain. I believe I can be of use somewhere. I'm not an idler at heart, you know. In time, perhaps —"

He stopped and peered into the western heaven. Looping from side to side in wide reconnaissance, a winged shape bore toward them through the twilight.

"Is it a vulture?" asked Ann, and thought of Saccarello. What symbol more fitting could pass athwart their sky!

Rodoslav let fall an ejaculation. "It's another aëroplane!"

"Another!" She stared as if he had said a hippogriff. "But it does not look like an aëroplane," she insisted. "I've never seen one like it."

"Yes, you have," Rodoslav replied, with a curious note in his voice. "You saw one like it at Rheims, and I saw it too. It belonged to Oliver Page. That's Page now. He's searching for you."

Ann, curious girl, felt her strength ooze out of her. "It can't be," she cried. "You're mistaken."

"No, I'm not mistaken. I saw his machine at Rheims before he took it apart. I had another glimpse of it at Brescia. He was somewhere near the castle, that's plain. They've sent him to look for you. It alters things, his coming this way. It makes things more difficult for you."

"Don't think of me now."

"I must," he said, and took counsel with himself for a moment, watching the aëroplane's sure advance. Then, rounding on her, "Run back up the cliff!" he directed peremptorily. "Signal him with your scarf. Go now!"

"But I —"

"Quick!" he charged. "Go while you can. I'll make it clear to you in a moment. It's your happiness I'm thinking of. Go, I tell you! Signal as if your life depended on it."

She obeyed, and he feigned to busy himself with his engine. Then, sure finally that the man aloft had marked the waving fabric, he straightened his bent shoulders, scanned the darkening sky, gazed hard as if he only now saw the newcomer, and, turning, with a furious gesture dashed at top speed toward Ann.

"We're at swords' points now, you and I," he enjoined. "We must not let him know the whole truth."

"I'm not afraid of the truth," she protested.

"You are not, no; but I see with a man's eyes. I know how that man will feel. He'll pardon everything you've done up to to-day; but he could never understand this last step of all. You must not let

him know you knew where we were bound. He'd believe you came because you loved me. It would stand between you always. Let him think it was a whim, this ride, that I deceived you; anything but the truth that you came where we have come, willingly. Don't face me that way. Let him see that you've come to hate me."

"But I don't — I can't —"

"I'll leave you now and make for my machine."

"You must not! I can't have him think you a coward. I'd rather risk —"

"No matter what he thinks about me," he cut her off. "It's what he thinks about you that matters. May Destiny be kind to you, my ally! Good-by."

"You shall not go this way. I refuse —"

"Good-by," he said again, and was gone.

As Page grounded, Rodoslav's machine spurned the cliff.

Page harassed her with no vain questionings. All such could wait. Even as he soothed a grief he did not understand, his face was turned toward the diminishing monoplane, trailing a long banner of smoke in the gathering night.

"We must not lose sight of him," he urged. "I owe it to law and order to watch where he goes."

Ann held her peace; but she did less than she might to speed their departure. Yet, even with such delays as a doting lover could pardon, they were swiftly in pursuit. Like hawk and quarry, as it seemed to her, they sped toward the opal glow that marked the highway of the vanished sun. Like hawk and quarry they left the harsh wilderness

"We must not lose sight of him."

behind, crossed a gentler land, sighted a little city's lights, the dull gleam of the Bocche di Cattaro, and then the open sea.

Whatever refuge the fugitive had first in mind, he dismissed it. Thus pressed, no spot near the castle could offer sanctuary. Straining her eyes to pierce the night, Ann saw him wheel boldly out over the Adriatic and head up the coast. After him swept Page.

"Don't follow now," begged Ann.

"Don't be afraid," he called back, thinking the sea terrified her. "We could keep this up for hours. He's the one who's nearing the end of his rope. I'll see where he comes down, that's all. Ashore let other people take the responsibility."

Yet he began to marvel at the endurance of that smoke-vomiting engine, so inferior to his own. Every minute he looked for it to fail and send Rodoslav planing landward. He did not envy him the feat of grounding on that rock-edged coast. Put to it himself, he would have chosen the breakers.

And then, as he watched and wondered, the end came. Amid the dark mass of the fleeing aëroplane there glowed a red point of light. But for an instant only was it a point. Almost as he perceived it, it became a leaping flame.

"Good God!" he exclaimed, realizing the truth. "The man's afire! Doesn't he know?"

Appalled at the disaster, Ann strove to turn away her eyes. Rodoslav did know, and was facing Death with all the coolness of his greater self. Seeing his peril at the outset, he shut off his engine and began to glide toward the waters of the Adriatic. Time

had no meaning to those who watched. It was at once an instant and a century, that, with one wing and then its fellow ablaze, the flame ever encroaching, till, like some holiday conceit, the whole aëroplane became outlined in fire, he contrived to hold his course. Then — but Ann saw no more. She had buried her face in her hands.

Nor could Page himself bear clear witness. Afterward — long afterward — he told her that Rodoslav fell as a star falls, and the imagery pleased her.

If he had flown less high, this Prince Icarus —

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